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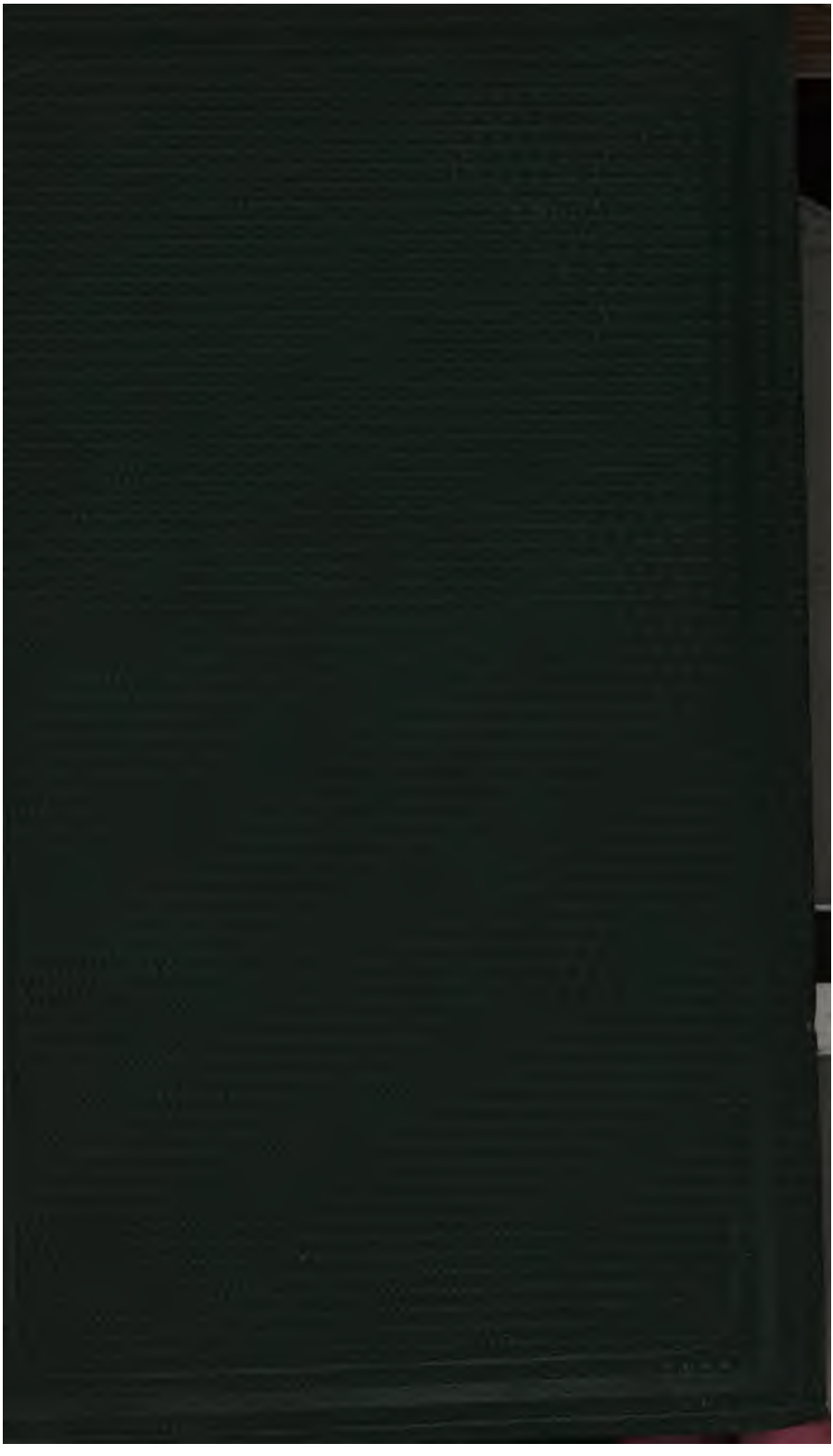

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MR. STEWART'S INTENTIONS.

VOL. III.

MR. STEWART'S INTENTIONS.

BY

FREDERICK WILLIAM ROBINSON,

AUTHOR OF

"GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY," "UNDER THE SPELL,"

"WILDFLOWER," "A WOMAN'S RANSOM,"

&c., &c.

"What is he, for Heaven's sake? Can no man give him his true character?"

HEYWOOD.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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CHRONICLES THE FURTHER INTENTIONS OF MR. STEWART.

CHAPTER X.

CALLED BACK.

IT seemed a long while before John came from the outer office into Mr. Stewart's room. It was a terrible ordeal to wait patiently now, knowing how near he was to me. I should be able to judge by his reception of me, by his new demeanour, whether all that had been spoken down at Wilthorpe were false or not. In his face I should read his guilt or innocence.

And in Mr. Stewart's presence all must be disguised still; I had promised Mrs. Kingsworth; I had promised myself. Whatever I feared or hoped must be kept a secret until John and I were alone together. John came along the passage at last; it was a free, bold tread, which echoed there —not the faltering step of guilt. An instant afterwards his hand rapped lightly on the door.

"Come in," said Mr. Stewart, and my brother—I call him brother still!—entered and stopped, finding his old employer not alone.

"Your pardon—I did not know——"

Mr. Stewart waved his hand towards me.

"Your sister, Casey—where are your eyes this morning?"

"My sister Bertha?—here!" he cried, turning to me with unfeigned astonishment; "why, whatever reason has brought you to Edinburgh?"

"I have come in search of you—Mrs. Kingsworth is anxious to see you, John."

"Ah! too late," he said, with a hasty shake of his head; "I will not have her money now. Affairs have changed—I have changed with them—I should have only thrown her money away, after all."

He was not guilty. No guilty man had ever spoken thus, or looked thus; his eyes flinched not from my earnest gaze; his face expressed a certain amount of curiosity in my demeanour, or my reasons for following him to Edinburgh, but he was no thief, and I whispered "Thank God!" to myself at once.

"Still you must come back with me, John," I urged; "Mrs. Kingsworth is ill, and very anxiously wishes to see you. I have come to Edinburgh for you."

He looked thoughtfully at the ground, and shook his head.

"She will not care to see me—she will only believe that my anxiety for her money, for a place in her will, has brought me to the Hall. She and I have been apart too long to care for each other much—even her money, offered in good faith on her side, only tended to my moral ruin. I shall stop here, Bertie."

"Not when I have told you all."

"Patience!" said he; "Mr. Stewart, I wish a few words with you."

"You may speak before your sister, Casey."

"But——"

"Go on—go on!" he said, impatiently.

"Well, if you wish it. When we parted you told me that I could do better away from you, that there were chances before me in the world not to be hastily neglected, and you gave me a recommendation to a Glasgow house. In fact, your

interest in me made a berth in that house a certainty, if I applied for it. Sir, I had my doubts then of the reasons for your removal of me, and I resented them by an effort to strike out a new path for myself. You and I spoke of that path together, and you would not advise me, but wrote me out a letter of introduction to your Glasgow friends, and said I could make use of it, or destroy it, as I pleased. I destroyed it."

"I am sorry."

"Because inadvertently your brother Richard turned my thoughts in a new direction; by a chance word offered me the clue to that which had been somewhat mysterious—the probability of your bankruptcy. I guessed all then—I saw where the trouble had been, and that it was a question of expense that had separated me from my best friend."

"Your best friend, sir, is nearer you than I am?"

"She is a good woman," said he, looking in my direction, "but we have not seen very much of each other in life—my own past wilfulness led me utterly away from her. I was a bad brother, a bad son, a bad friend, until I met with you. I

went on to ruin because no strong thoughtful mind set itself the task of trying to make good out of me. I was thoughtless and improvident. I did not believe in my own power to amend, until you trusted me when I was at my worst. You have been more like a brother to me than a master —I see all that now, very clearly; though the reason which led you to interest yourself in me still remains a mystery." (Mr. Stewart and I both winced at this.) "You set me a good example, and I followed it as well as I could, considering the bad examples I had always imitated. I did my best—and now you are in trouble, I have come back to do my best again, to take my place at my old desk and work for you, as, 'pon my soul, I don't think any man has worked yet! I couldn't sleep for thinking of this—I got up in the night at your brother's house and came away full of it—yesterday I called, but you were not expected home till to-day; and to-day I am here again, to manage the whole business if you like—free of all expense till we set you on the top of the tree again!"

It was his old sanguine nature leading him into

a little extravagance, but it was leading him in the right direction at last, and making him a better man. Yes, I forgave this Mr. Stewart his past trespasses against me with all my heart—I had cause even to be grateful to him.

"Things have taken a turn for the better, Casey," said Mr. Stewart, laughing, "and I hope that we shall get on without making a slave of you. The panic is subsiding, my creditors have seen my books, heard my story, had clear evidence that I have been borne down by adverse circumstances and not by my own rash speculations, and we start afresh from this hour. Miss Casey, I cannot spare your brother now."

"You must," I said passionately, "at once, before the next train to London starts!"

He read my agitation and suspense, and saw at once that I had more to say to Kingsworth.

"I will leave you to your sister's persuasion, Casey—take what leave of absence you may require, and come back when you please to your old post here."

He went out of the room, and closed the door behind him. I was at John's side, with my hands

upon his arm and my face eagerly upturned to his.

"You must come, John—there is much to explain. She is unhappy—dying!"

"Dying!" he said; "poor old lady, I am sorry to hear that. And my letter to her, as well as to you, reaches the Hall to-day."

"What have you said to her?"

"I have given up my pension—it hampers me—I am going to live without it, and shake off this shame. I told her so."

"Not unkindly, John?" I asked.

"No—I think not. I did my best to show that I was grateful for all the money she had wasted on me."

"That's well; now come and ask pardon for your past life, and for her blessing on your future. Come and tell her that you did not rob her of two thousand pounds!"

"WHAT!"

"I do not believe this now—but oh! John, the proofs were very strong against you. The money was in Richard Stewart's house, and only missed after you had left there in the night—it has broken her heart."

"She and you believe that!" he cried; "I must have been a thorough villain in your estimation, then. Let her think her worst—I will not move a step to assert that which is false. I have been my own enemy, no one else's. With all her wealth, she has ever been uncharitable, and now that she has taught you——"

"Hush—hush!" I screamed; "for mercy's sake be silent. *Your own mother!*"

"Bertha!"

He held me at arm's length to see if trouble or excitement had not turned my brain. So wild a truth as that was not to be realized at once.

"Your own mother, John—a woman who has suffered much, and is now heavily afflicted. A woman bitterly repentant for all the past which separated you from her, and who sees now the error which shut you from her heart. I have come in search of you to tell you this—I have come at her request to bring you to her bedside. John, you do not hesitate now!"

"My own mother!" he murmured, letting his arms fall to his side. "Poor woman! And you?"

"Are not your sister—only in heart, John."

"I will come with you—I am ready," he said.

We went together from the room into the office, where Mr. Stewart was waiting for us.

"You have made a convert of this stubborn fellow," he said, smiling for an instant, before the gravity on our faces brought its shadow to his own. "Miss Casey," he added, "there is no worse news kept back from me—no news which affects me more directly?"

"No, sir."

"I shall hear some account of Mrs. Kingsworth's illness from Isabel by next post—I trust it will be a good report. You are going now?"

"Yes, at once."

He looked at his watch.

"You have twenty minutes to spare—good-bye."

He shook hands with John and me, and we went hastily out of his office. John had become very grave and stern; there were many thoughts to distress him in that hour—he saw now what he had lost by his sad life, and whose heart he had nearly broken, perhaps; how his own wild actions had kept the secret of his parentage away from him.

"If we were only nearer home, Bertie!" he said, when a cab was taking us to my hotel.

The portmanteau, that had never been opened, received back into my custody, my small bill settled with the proprietor of the hotel, and then the railway station, and five minutes to spare before the train started Londonwards.

John was not a strong man; he had never been strong of purpose, or capable of much resistance to adversity; it was not natural to expect him to change suddenly, or find him prepared at all points to meet trouble bravely. He was not a man for sudden shocks; they unnerved him. When we were in the railway carriage he broke into a shivering fit that alarmed me.

"Let me get some brandy?"

"Keep still," he said, "I shall be better presently. I am subject to these attacks—the drink did it years ago. It will pass away; but this has unsettled me again, just as I was turning to a more honourable life."

"You will lead an honourable life from this day forth—for her sake, who must not die without a hope of you."

"Will she die, do you think?" he asked eagerly; "is there no hope?"

"She is in God's hands—I cannot say."

"But you have hope yourself?"

"Scarcely."

"If she could only live, Bertie, to trust in me! —to see that it was not all empty profession on my part! But she will die unhappy, with my wasted life before her, and no words of mine can give her any comfort."

He covered his face with his hands, and sat motionless for awhile. Long after the train had clanked from beneath the Edinburgh terminus he retained that position, thinking of the end. Suddenly he lowered his hands, and looked at me.

"What is this about the missing money? What does it mean?—whose money is it?"

Whilst the express train dashed its way from the North country, and it seemed from the speed that we must soon be home at Wilthorpe, I told him the story of the two thousand pounds, the chain of evidence that was against him, and that Fate seemed to have forged for him. I told him all that had followed this robbery, of the revelation it had

brought about in the home of his mother at the charge against him. I assured him of the anxiety she felt to hear the truth, and of the happiness in store for her to know that he was innocent. And I expressed a faint hope that the news would change her for the better, and give her strength again with the peace of mind that it would bring.

"It's a story that might have come out of a book," he said; "and it may end worse than any tragedy. If I could be sure that I might see her for a moment before she died, or hear her call me son for once in life! But it will not be—it can never be!"

"Courage—and faith!"

But my courage had deserted me, and my words did not assure him. He dreaded the future meeting; his cheek had paled already with the thoughts besetting him.

When the train stopped for the first time at Newcastle, a new thought struck me, and I hastily lowered the window.

"Guard, how long does this train remain here?"

"Five minutes, ma'am."

"The telegraph office—quick!"

The man was seized with the same wish to hasten; my impetuosity carried him away, and we both hurried to the office.

"Paper and ink!" I cried; "a message! There's the money—quick, sir, quick!"

I beat my hand upon the counter till the form was before me. In an instant I had dashed off the following:

"*Kingsworth is with me. He is innocent.*"

I gave the clerk in attendance Mrs. Kingsworth's address; he was seized also with the wish to help me, and wrote it down at once. I passed some money to him—I am ignorant of the amount to this day—and hurried back to my train, the doors of which the guard was locking once more.

Again by Kingsworth's side, and telling him what I had done. His lip quivered, and he murmured some indistinct thanks. A third person had taken his place in the carriage, and we spoke no more of the hopes and fears we had in concert. John leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes; but he did not sleep. He wished to shut himself

away in his own world, and the prospect made him moan and ring his hands together. Now and then he glanced through the window, as if with a faint hope of recognizing a locality nearer his journey's end; then he looked at his watch, and leaned back again impatiently.

"It will never end—this day!" he muttered.

The journey was not done yet; the night met us on the way, and shut out the landscape, and still there were hours before us of this weary travelling. They who have travelled like us in hot haste, can judge our feelings best; there is no sense of suspense equal to that time—thinking, waiting, and, despite all rapid progress, journeying so slowly to the end!

Ours was a long journey, and it was not till one in the morning of the following day that we reached Peterborough.

"At last!" John exclaimed, and leaped from the carriage to the platform. The portmanteau disinterred from the luggage-van, and we were ready to proceed upon the last stage of our return.

"We shall be delayed here," said John, impa-

tiently; "at this hour of the night there will be no one to help us. Bertie, she's dead—that is as surely impressed upon my mind as though I had seen her die hours ago!"

In the bustle of the crowd fighting for the refreshment-room before the last start was made for London—that crowd through which we forced our way, I came upon a face I knew—Richard Stewart's.

"Mr. Stewart—say she lives?" I entreated.

"I cannot say, Miss Casey," he replied; "I have been away from the Hall three hours, and I left her sinking."

"Quick, then!" cried my brother; "why do we waste time here?"

Richard Stewart met him with a fierce frown, that told of a new enmity between those I esteemed; but John did not appear to notice it. He was like a man walking in his sleep.

"I have Mr. Mannington's trap outside, and the fastest horse from the stables. You are not afraid of rapid driving, Miss Casey?"

"No."

We three hastened from the station—the same

conveyance which took me first to Wilthorpe was awaiting us. Richard Stewart assisted me to a seat beside him; my brother took his place at the back, and we drove off.

"Then there is no hope, sir?" I asked.

"No hope, Miss Casey. Do not build on that."

"You have seen her?"

"Yes—it was her wish. She has been strangely considerate of us all, in her last moments. A good mistress, who deserved a better fate."

"What do you mean?"

He did not answer. We were already recklessly dashing along the dark country road; the horse plunging forwards at its greatest speed, and the dog-cart swaying to and fro. But I knew no fear that night, and I was only anxious to reach home.

After awhile I asked Mr. Richard Stewart again what fate he indicated by his speech; and in the darkness I could see his lips compress with the effort to restrain his answer. He gave a hasty glance over his shoulder, at my brother sitting with his arms folded on the seat behind us. I knew his answer then!

"It is all a mistake—he is innocent," I answered quickly.

"It is best to think so now."

"You will think so, Mr. Stewart, when he explains the truth. I hope you will."

"Is it capable of explanation?"

I did not reply. I was aggrieved at his persistence, and indisposed, like himself, to dwell upon the subject. My brother might have been an automaton, for the interest he took in our conversation; he heard us not, or he cared not to defend himself just then.

We were all silent the remainder of the way, save when it was necessary to wake the keepers of the toll-gates from their dreams, and then Richard Stewart aroused the echoes of the night with his deep voice.

"This is your third night of restless action," he added, once. "I suppose they will kill you in the end!"

Then we were driving madly along once more, the black line of hedgerows flying past us, Richard Stewart at times making for the grass paths by the side, in his eagerness to cut off the

curves of the road. To those few people on our route that night he seemed a mad driver, reckless of all consequence; but he knew the road thoroughly, the capacity of the horse he drove, and he had been urged to hasten with us homewards. So we swept along in the darkness and wintriness of that March night, and reached Wilthorpe at two o'clock.

When we had passed along the carriage drive, and were before the lawn fronting the great mansion, my brother leaped out suddenly, and fell.

Richard Stewart reined in his horse.

"Are you mad, man?" he shouted.

But my brother had staggered to his feet, and was already making his way towards the porch. We were before him despite his eagerness, and we three went up the steps together.

They had heard us coming within the house—the door was opened, and the light from the great hall lamp was full upon us.

"*Dead?*" said Kingsworth, looking from one to another of the servants who were standing about the hall, male and female, unsettled by the calamity hovering in their midst.

"N—no, sir, we don't think so!"

"Let me pass—make way—which room?"

"Show Mr. Kingsworth to the room," one servant said.

The news had spread then—the whole story had welled its way to the ears of the servants of the place. She had said that all should be known before I came back there!

"Let me go first, John," I said, "we must not kill her with your haste."

I ran up-stairs, he following me. There were more servants on the stairs, standing with their backs against the banisters, whispering of the news, waiting for the end. All was confusion and uncertainty.

"Mrs. Kingsworth's son," was whispered once more amongst them, and they made way for his progress, some bowing and curtseying as he followed me.

On the landing-place, and proceeding down the corridor, where Mr. Mannington, trembling as with palsy, came towards us. He had not faced death since his wife's decease, and he feared to face it then. He was standing outside the rich woman's

door, with his back against the wall, a haggard old man, not unlike his sister in the face at that time. The doctor, with his stick to his lips, was conversing with him as we approached.

"Living yet?" I gasped.

"Yes, just living."

"Conscious?"

"No," said the doctor, "she has not been conscious these last two hours."

"Oh! don't say that!"

I passed into the room, and Kingsworth followed me. Behind us came the doctor; Mr. Manning-ton approached the door, and then went shivering back again.

She lay in her bed still as the grave that was so close upon her; her dark-haired niece sitting near her, with her hands clasped, watching every feeble respiration of the dying woman. In the back-ground, a silent watcher also, Emma Eaves. Beyond her, nodding in an easy chair, the nurse hired from the village. On the table the lamp that my mistress had held in her hand the night she stole down-stairs to meet her death.

"Too late!" whispered Bel.

"Not too late! It can't be too late!" cried Kingsworth, rushing to the bed-side, and tearing aside the curtains. "*Mother*, you will speak to me. MOTHER, I say!"

"*Here!*"

The nerveless hand seemed making an effort to stretch itself towards him; he clasped it in his own and bent over her to listen.

"She spoke to me!" he said, looking wildly round at us, as though we had asserted to the contrary. "Oh! say forgiven to your guilty son!"

The grey eyes opened, and her voice, deep and resonant, startled us all with its new power.

"Not guilty—of *that*, John?"

"God be my judge—no!"

"I—I have prayed—for—this!" she murmured, "I——"

He bent his head to listen to her dying words, but they passed away with her, and all was peace and rest.

"Dead!" whispered the physician.

It was caught up by the listener at the door; it passed from the servants on the stairs to the servants huddled together in the hall—it stole forth

in the darkness of the night and went on its way to Wilthorpe village; it was told in Woundell with the early news. The rich woman dead—the woman who had made few friends, and been eccentric to the last, and scoffed at those who would have fawned and flattered her. For ever after that day to be missed in Wilthorpe church—to leave a blank in that little world wherein she had moved, and yet had ever stood apart from. She did not die unmourned at least, and she did not die unhappy!

END OF THE FOURTH BOOK.

BOOK V.

"TWO THOUSAND POUNDS."

CHAPTER I.

CHANGE AT WILTHORPE.

WAS there ever a will written which satisfied those who anticipated benefits from it? A just will in itself, with the exception of that one clause affecting each of us in particular, and *that* might have been altered with so much more fairness, good feeling, honesty!

Let the will include more than one member of a family, and more than one member will record their protest, and find fault with the way in which the money has been left.

Mrs. Kingsworth had left a long will and a just will behind her, had added more than one codicil, had studied carefully everything connected with her property, had striven at the last to do justice to all. I had seen her busy with her will and the

witnesses thereto on the day Mr. Stewart proposed to Bel Mannington—that was the last date on the parchment scroll—the last codicil which reversed much that had been written in the body of the document.

At one period she had left her whole property to Isabel Mannington, at another period she had modified that decree. There were money, houses, and land to bequeath—much money, many houses, and the land of half a county—it had been a study to dispose of these, and this was the result.

We heard her will read in the great drawing-room on the day of the funeral, and Mr. Mannington sat and breathed hard as the lawyer went from beginning to end of the parchment folios. The codicils were less satisfactory than the will itself, and disturbed his nervous system more.

The Hall, the estate which appertained to it, all the house property in Wilthorpe and Woundell not included in the estate, the money at her banker's, the money in the funds, after payment of all legacies, legal expenses, &c., to her son John Kingsworth, only fruit of her union with Matthew Kingsworth, formerly of Wilthorpe. Her son,

born in London on March 23rd, 18——, and brought up by Mrs. Casey, deceased. Inside the will was the register of her son's birth, copied from the parish book of St. Botolph.

To her brother, Walter Mannington, the sum of thirty-five thousand pounds in trust for his daughter Isabel; the said Walter Mannington to have use of such monies until his daughter's marriage or attainment of her twenty-first year. Also, to the said Walter Mannington a legacy of five thousand pounds.

To Bertha Casey a legacy of five thousand pounds, together with a house at Wilthorpe called Meadow House, adjacent to the vicarage.

To Richard Stewart five thousand pounds—Richard Stewart, *sole executor to her last will and testament.*

To every servant of the household a legacy of greater or less amount, according to his or her time of service, and to Emma Eaves two hundred pounds.

These the main points of the will which there was no disputing. A clear, precise will, that had been carefully thought of, still more carefully re-

vised, the joint production of a thoughtful woman and a clever lawyer.

John Kingsworth, who had anticipated no legacy, was the most surprised; Richard Stewart, who had not been consulted as to the executorship, the next in degree of astonishment.

"You are not compelled legally to take all this trouble, if your consent has not been obtained," Mr. Mannington explained; "you can——"

"I know," said Richard Stewart, "and Mrs. Kingsworth knew also that I should not care for trouble in her service. Until the will is carried out, I am her servant still."

Mr. Mannington did not offer any further suggestions; hazarded no remarks upon his own small legacy, or the banishment of himself and daughter from the chief estate.

He was a disappointed man, but he only showed his disappointment by a reserved manner, and was even less nervous than usual after the result was known. He started for London the next day, and was a week absent from the Hall. When he returned he professed to have been looking after a house in town for himself and daughter; and if he

had been searching for some proof to render the will invalid, it had been a nugatory effort, and scarcely worth alluding to in this place.

He did not go to London, but took a house for a year in Wilthorpe village, until such time as he had settled what to do. He was very unsettled, he told everybody—only forty thousand pounds out of the estate for him and his, after all his study of his sister's eccentricities! He uttered his complaints into the ears of every listener—more complaints than of his sister, as will presently appear. He would not believe in faithful promises and honourable intentions after this; he had lost faith in the uprightness of human nature. He had loved his sister very dearly, and she had professed to love him, and then left him a legacy no larger than her land-bailiff's. He had wasted many years of his life in waiting upon her, and this was his reward! Thank God, he had not wanted money; he was not a poor man. He bore no malice, and he forgave his sister from the bottom of his heart. He had been advised, he told his friends, in confidential moments, to throw over the will and prove his sister's insanity from earliest

times, before her marriage, if it were necessary; but then, unless he could prove false identity on the part of John Kingsworth, all the money—his daughter's legacy included—might fall to John's share instead of his own. He would put up with the loss, then, and occupy his leisure moments on thoughts concerning the unprofitableness of putting faith in women's promises.

Meanwhile the great change began in Wilthorpe —before three months were over Richard Stewart had fulfilled his trust. He was a man who worked hard, and was never happy till his task was done. Never in the history of executorship had a will been proved, an estate valued, and all things finally arranged in so short a time. The Hall was in possession of John Kingsworth—the forty thousand pounds had been paid to Mr. Mannington—I was in my new home at Meadow House, and my five thousand pounds in the three per cents, in the early days of July.

John Kingsworth, gentleman, came to see me very often. We were brother and sister still —we could not live away the old days, or forget our past relations to each other. He was dull at

the great house which had been bequeathed him, and came to mine, where Emma Eaves was living with me as companion and friend.

Was it for my sake alone that he came to Meadow House? I did not think so after a while. He was a gentleman now, and Emma Eaves had been a lady's-maid; but they were old friends, and Emma had loved him dearly in his past estate. They never spoke of love together—they were very unlike lovers. Emma Eaves sought every pretext to avoid his company, until I reprimanded her for that, and then she sat, grave and almost sullen, in the room with John and me.

She could speak of him eloquently after he had gone—of his rise in life, and how glad she was to have been a witness to it—of the change for the better in him since he had inherited his mother's property—of the gentleman he looked now! Once I asked her in confidence, when her heart seemed more full of him than usual, if she loved him the better for all this, and was prepared to be his wife still, and she broke away from the discussion with her old impulsiveness.

"I cannot speak of it—I will not speak of it—

time enough, when he wishes to take me to that house—time enough when he shows that he can think of a poor girl like me."

"Is he likely to forget you?"

"Don't ask me, please—he is not happy, and you and I should think a little more of *that*."

No, he was not happy. Emma Eaves was right. Whether the shock of the meeting with his mother had been too sudden and unprepared for, or whether his rise to greatness had proved that even riches fail to bring happiness and peace, it was certain that he was not happy.

He was a steady and grave man—a man very different to his old self. He was a good master to his servants; they even began to whisper in the village that he was a very charitable man; but he seemed to have inherited, with his mother's money, a portion of his mother's eccentricity. When I glanced at him sitting in the pew at Wilthorpe, in his deep mourning, I could scarcely reconcile that thoughtful-looking man with the reckless being who had come for Mrs. Kingsworth's money, when I was housekeeper to a City company. In his new estate, all the old traits of character had vanished.

It was the end of July, when I asked him if he would place confidence in me; when I reminded him that I was still his sister, ever troubled by cares affecting *him*.

"What makes you think that I am altered?"

"I miss the sanguine nature that saw hope in everything, and laughed at present difficulties, John."

We were walking together along the country road when this dialogue took place.

"Are not my hopes more than realized, and are there any difficulties to encounter now? See what a gentleman I am; heir to a large estate, and with a fortune ready to my hand."

"You are not happy."

"Not yet. These are early times," he said; "I have not forgotten my mother yet—I have still before me the remembrance of what a bad son I was, and I read her life of trouble and anxiety concerning me."

"But there is something more?"

"Well, there is."

"Will you confide in me, the old friend to whom you used to tell your troubles once?"

"The old friend, and the only friend left. I must tell my troubles to some one before I go away from here."

"Go away!"

"I am tired of Wilthorpe—I am suspected here. People hold themselves aloof from me; the story of my old life, bad and improvident as it was, has reached here in an exaggerated form, and is already gossip for the village. Every boy I meet knows my past life—it is a fair return for all the evil I have done, to see it shadowed forth again."

"You will live that old life down, John."

"That is not all," he continued; "if it were truth told concerning me, I would take the raking up of my old faults as a natural consequence of their commitment. But they are whispering about here that I was a thief before I came into the property; that I robbed my own mother, and broke her heart. That story of the two thousand pounds is circulated also in the county—honest men believe it—Richard Stewart believes it."

"We will show them all how deceived they are, in time," I said assuringly.

"I shall not wait for their better opinion," said

my brother, proudly; "why should I waste years of my life in trying to redeem my character in the eyes of these people? I am alone, Bertie; the country gentlemen hold themselves aloof from me; I was a disgrace to my mother, and unacknowledged by her in her lifetime; the exaggerated reasons for that act are themes for every clodhopper in the parish. I shall sell the Hall."

"Would she have wished that, John?—she who was proud of her name, and her position in the county?"

"It was her husband's property—not her own. She would wish my happiness, at least."

"You will do nothing hastily?"

"No; I can bear my solitude a little longer. I have not matured my plans; I am thinking of my future, and when the result is arrived at, I will come to the old friend for her opinion."

"Truly?"

"Truly," he answered.

We had approached my little villa by this time; at the door, evidently awaiting our arrival, was Richard Stewart.

"I have been to the Hall after you, Mr. Kingsworth," he said shortly; "finding you absent, I came hither."

"Anything of importance, Mr. Stewart?"

"I think so—probably you may be of the same opinion."

"Shall we adjourn to the Hall?"

"I would prefer stating all that I have to communicate in the presence of witnesses."

"In that case," said my brother, reddening somewhat at Richard Stewart's manner, "we will adjourn to Miss Casey's parlour."

"With Miss Casey for a witness?" I asked.

"If you please," said Richard Stewart, gravely.

I did not like this odd preface to business matters; I liked less the grave, determined aspect of Richard Stewart. He resembled a man who had made up his mind to one course, and was resolved to follow it, however painful to himself or others.

We went into my little front room, three people bent on business. John and I remained standing, whilst Mr. Stewart drew forth a pocket-book,

opened it upon the table, and proceeded to draw forth sundry bank notes.

"Will you please to count them, Mr. Kingsworth?"

Mr. Kingsworth took them up mechanically, and counted them at Richard Stewart's request. When he had finished, I noted that his hand trembled, and his face coloured; he was a man of no self-command.

"Two thousand pounds," John said, in a hoarse voice. "Well, what is it for?"

"It is compensation money, paid by me, your mother's bailiff, to you, that mother's heir. Will you give me my receipt, and then we will talk of something else that I have upon my mind?"

"Pardon me," said my brother, with some dignity, "but we will speak of this in the first place. I am at a loss to understand."

"You had better give me the receipt, sir."

"Why do *you* pay me this?"

"Some money was left in charge to me, and my want of proper caution caused two thousand pounds to be stolen from my house. When it was in my power, I intended to repay that sum to Mrs.

Kingsworth—you stand her representative, sir—take up the money."

"No."

"It is a debt due to the estate—you have been robbed of it as heir."

"Let the robber pay me, not Richard Stewart."

Richard Stewart looked up with an intention of replying hastily, perhaps unwisely, to this; encountered my glance, which asked for his consideration; paused, and said, in a less fierce voice than might have been anticipated:

"The robber may repent some day, and pay Richard Stewart in *his* turn. I will bide my time, and trust in his repentance."

"I shall not take this money," said my brother, firmly. "I would as soon take your life."

"I shall pay it into your bankers', if you refuse it now," said Stewart.

"I refuse it now—I refuse it for good. Stewart, you do this to humiliate me," cried John; "you come here in your arrogance of uprightness to taunt me with that old suspicion. Man, why do you think so badly of me?"

"I say nothing," was the reply; "I acknowledge

myself in the wrong by this offer of payment—the estate, through my means, has become two thousand pounds the poorer."

"Put away that money."

"No."

And Richard Stewart thrust his hands to the depths of his pockets, and looked defiantly at Kingsworth.

"Bertie," said John Kingsworth, turning to me for assistance in his distress, "ask this man to be less foolish?"

"No, don't speak," said Richard Stewart, "I am reason-proof. Mr. Kingsworth, will you give me my receipt?"

"I tell you that I would sooner die than take that money."

"Mr. Kingsworth, the world says it was either you or I that took the money on that night, and you deny it?"

"Neither you nor I, sir."

"One or another it must have been, and I am unhappy concerning it."

"Will my taking this money make you less unhappy?"

"Yes."

"I deny touching this money. Do you hear, man, that if it be necessary to vindicate my honesty to you in this fashion, I will swear it."

Stewart seemed moved by this impetuosity.

"Then the loss is mine, and I have a right to make it good. Your mother would have taken this money, Mr. Kingsworth."

"I do not believe it."

John swept the notes towards Richard Stewart with an impatient hand; the land-bailiff's persistence irritated him.

"If you have so much money to spare, lend it to your brother, Mr. Stewart. Don't pain me with this obtrusive honesty."

"For my brother I have done my best in life. When he requires aid, I will not flinch to offer it. As for this two thousand pounds," he said, seizing the notes, and thrusting them into his pocket, "I will adopt another means to restore it to its owner."

John seemed relieved at the removal of the money from his sight; he looked uneasily towards his tormentor, when Stewart said:

"Now for the next business."

"I am pressed for time, Mr. Stewart."

"I will be brief, sir. I have very little to say," Richard Stewart continued; "I have fulfilled my task as executor to your mother's will. I believe that there is nothing left undone;—whilst in her service I have at least *tried* to do my duty. Affairs have changed; the office which I took upon myself has become irksome; I ask leave to remind you of a letter which I wrote to you three months ago."

"Informing me of your intention to resign the post of land-bailiff to my estate. I had hoped that you had changed your mind."

"No, sir."

"I am very sorry—I can but accept your resignation. You leave me hampered by an estate of which I know little; you, like the rest of the people about here, will turn away from me. When am I to expect your resignation?"

"In one week from this date."

"Very well."

And John Kingsworth walked moodily out of the house, leaving Richard Stewart with me.

With Richard Stewart I felt offended. I con-

sidered that he had too sternly assumed the part of judge, and had had too little consideration for one who was innocent in my eyes, and would some day prove his innocence before the world.

"Ever a stern judge, Mr. Stewart—having no mercy upon those whom no power can prove guilty. It is scarcely to be wondered at that you are a lonely and unhappy man."

"Lonely I am—it is my choice, or fate, what you will. But who dares to say that I am unhappy?"

"I have no right to assert it, at least."

"I judge not your brother," he said roughly; "or if I judge him," he corrected, "I am ready to atone for any misconception when the time comes to show him in the right. Possibly I am a suspicious man—if my suspicions have wounded you, I am sorry."

"They must naturally wound me."

"Miss Casey, I know little of your brother—candidly, I have not seen a great deal in his character to respect."

"On the night he left your house, you found your safe open and money abstracted. But he left

the house in haste, not with the money, but with the intention of offering his services to your brother, who was then in trouble. Your brother had been his friend, and John was grateful."

Richard Stewart looked down and considered this.

"Miss Casey," he said at last, "if you believe that your brother never took this money—if you think that he is innocent of that crime, say so."

"I say so, without a doubt."

"Then you must think *me* a thundering thief!—good-day!"

"Come back, sir."

He was at the door, but he stopped at my imperious demand.

"Will you hear me out? Will you hear my belief that during the absence of John Kingsworth and yourself that money was taken—there were strange people that week in Wilthorpe."

"I have endeavoured to think of this in every way," said Stewart; "there is not one theory, possible or impossible, which I have not studied. Sometimes I try to think that Mrs. Kingsworth was eccentric enough to come to my lodge and

take the money, and then weak enough to forget it afterwards. But the effort is vain, and I return to the old stern thought there is no shaking off."

"I cannot hope to alter that thought," I said, sadly, "it is beyond my power. But let me ask you—you who are full of trust in your own judgment—have you not before this wronged your own brother?"

"No."

"Are you quite certain that he has not been misjudged—remember all the past, and what you said in it?"

"All that I have said, I can repeat word for word."

"You are not friends with your brother yet, then? You, bearing such deep enmity against one who should be dearest to you, I cannot hope to move."

"Miss Casey speaks in a hurry," he replied.

"Indeed!" I said.

"Of course you do—women always do," he said, brusquely. "I bear no enmity against Mark—I would cut my right hand off to-morrow for him, if it would be of any use."

"But——"

"But, Miss Casey, if you ask me whether I have lost my confidence in him, I answer 'yes.' Not my confidence in his genius, his capacity for business, his honourable method of conducting that business, but in the depth of his heart which set money next to it, and valued that and his name in the market before myself or—you."

"Hush!—what are you saying?"

"I may explain now. When you and he talked of marrying each other, his first great business loss occurred. That hampered him; then the bank, in which he kept a heavy account, failed; and, rich as he was, there lay before him an uphill struggle. All this Mr. Kingsworth knows, for he has hinted as much—all this you know."

"Your brother told me—there was a meeting of his creditors whilst I was at Edinburgh."

"He wrote to me about his losses, and I did my best to help him in my way—but his pride, or his reluctance to confiscate the little money that I had, led him to refuse. Matters became worse, and he drew towards the verge of bankruptcy. On one dark day for him and me, there seemed no

escape from ruin, and his strong heart gave way."

"Go on."

"I am going on as fast as I can," he said irritably. "On that day he thought of you. On that day he wrote to me confessing that he could not share poverty with you, or drag you down to poverty with him; that he had ensnared you by false pretences, and I was to prepare you for that which he had not the courage to attempt yet. That was my brother's first mistake."

"Yes—I did not want his money!"

"I went to Edinburgh to see him and reason with him. I found that the tide was strong against him, and that he must eventually give way. I found him solicitous to keep his perilous position a secret, although but a miracle could save him from the shipwreck. To keep this secret, and yet to bid you be prepared, was still his cry, and I came back with it ringing in my ears."

"At that time I added to his trouble by my jealousy—I see that now."

"Well, I tried to prepare you and failed—perhaps that was my mistake. Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"This may not interest you much now," he said; "all the better—I am glad of that! And I am telling you this in order to explain why I bear such *enmity* against my brother Mark."

"I cannot see that yet."

"Because you will not wait till I have finished," he said; "it's a bad habit of yours. If you remember, I have spoken of it once or twice before. It's no business of mine, but I don't like it any the better for that."

Though I was still angry with him for his dogged obstinacy, I could not restrain a smile at this flying personality.

"This is not a laughing matter we are coming to," he said gravely; "it made a child of me once, and I have never forgiven myself that blubbering day! Now—the sequel. My brother came to Wilthorpe in the ball week—to tell you all. To confess to you that his position as a merchant was grievously imperilled, and that in fact he must sink down to ruin. Before him he saw a long uphill fight for the old position; but he and I had met again, and I bade him consider well how he flung his whole life's happiness away

after the riches that were escaping him. I told him that you—but never mind what I told him you were !—but I thought that I had made him ashamed of his old fears. He went to Woundell ball to fulfil a foolish promise that he had made, and to keep up the delusion, even to people who were not concerned in the matter, that he was the same light-hearted, wealthy Mr. Stewart. You and he met then—he made a fool of his explanations, and you were not particularly wise in yours, and hence the quarrel which parted both of you for ever."

"Yes, for ever."

"You regret this ?"

"No, sir—it was best. This is your version of the story."

"Only mine," he said drily; "you need not believe anything I say—I don't ask you to believe it! I scarcely care about saying any more—the rest is easily guessed—the rest which set my brother and me apart, as well as you two simpletons."

"You have been a long while preparing me for that which now you endeavour to evade. It is the quarrel between you and him in which I

am interested—which I would have cease."

"A little while after all his professions of attachment to you, he proposes to Miss Mannington. My brother does this—whom I would as soon have suspected of an ungenerous act, as—as—I would you."

He made me start at this, but he took no heed of the compliment in his excitement. He was scarcely aware that he had uttered it.

"When he lost you, he lost much of his better nature. Miss Mannington was in his way; she was the daughter of a rich man, likely to be the sole heiress of a rich woman—her money, the promise of her money, might save him at the last. He was reckless, and disheartened, and he debased himself to that."

"There, you are wrong."

"I accused him of it when it was too late," he said, vehemently; "I told him that he had better have gone down to ruin honestly, than have sought to save his credit, and position, by marrying Miss Mannington. And by the way that he defended himself, I knew how intense had been his struggle to sink his better nature."

"You are wrong, wrong, wrong! He loved Miss Mannington in Edinburgh, when he first saw her—it was love for her that turned him away from me, and took him to her side. There's the injustice you have done your brother—the same petty spirit jumping hastily at conclusions, and condemning without evidence."

"When he called his creditors together at Edinburgh, it was the story of his engagement—of his coming marriage—which appeased them."

"That did not prove his want of affection for her."

"I am glad he has a champion still—I wish that I could think of him like you," sighed Richard Stewart; "my trouble began, my unhappiness began, when he set his soul on money."

"If I believed this, I would not let Miss Mannington remain in ignorance; but utterly discrediting your fancies, I ask you, for her sake, not to sow one suspicion in her mind."

"I will respect your wish, and she will never guess it before or after marriage. Mark will be a good husband to her; Mark will learn to love her as his wife, and they will be as true a couple as

most pairs it has been my lot to meet with. If he could have married you instead of——"

"Is it fair to harp upon that supposition?—I say it was for the best, Richard Stewart!"

"Say what you like, but I say it wasn't!" And snatching up his hat, he darted from the room.

When he was gone I remembered that I had forgotten something by which I might have strengthened the evidence in my brother's favour. But I should see him again, before he went away from Wilthorpe for good. Wilthorpe would be scarcely Wilthorpe without Richard Stewart, I thought. That would be another friend the less in the place; he was bad-tempered, obstinate, and rash in his judgments, but I considered him a friend. Not very long ago I had looked upon him as a brother, and been won to like him by his brotherly-respect for me, and I could not wholly shake the old liking from my heart for all his dogmatism. I could think more of my new evidence to disturb his conviction of John Kingsworth's guilt, than of the story he had told me of my lost love. It was a good sign that the old love was troubling me no

longer; I had fought my battle, and the wars were over! In my new hermitage at Meadow House, I could rest content—ay, even when my heart was lighter, dance gaily at Mark Stewart's wedding feast!

Well, she is no true woman who cannot get over her trouble when the lover turns away from pursuit of her. To mourn for the man who thought it better to break his engagement, is to mourn in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, for a scamp. (Mark Stewart was the exception to the rule, but I gave way to no morbid sorrowing, for all that.) She who mourns makes a hero out of unworthy materials, and scares honest folk with her morbidity. Better to shake him off from one's mind like a dew-drop, and turn at once to the sunshine, than let his "ugly black presence" mar the natural rejoicing of a heart that is young, pure, and true.

CHAPTER II.

CONSCIENCE MONEY.

EARLY the next morning I saw Richard Stewart once more. From my window, which commanded an extensive view of the high road, I saw him approaching in the distance. He was coming towards me at a great pace, walking in the middle of the road, oblivious to the shady side of the way that hot sunny morning in July.

He encountered Emma Eaves in the garden; through my open window I heard him peremptorily address her. Emma Eaves and Richard Stewart had never been good friends.

"Where's Miss Casey?"

"In her room. What do you want here again?"

"A cool question that. What's that to do with you?"

"Have you anything more to say against Mr. Kingsworth?" asked Emma, with far from amiable glances in her eyes.

"More. What! have you been at your old listening tricks again?"

"No. But you shout so loudly, and you are one of the many who hate him and speak ill of him everywhere."

"Am I?"

He passed her, and came through the open door to my room.

"Come in," I called in response to his summons, and he turned the door handle and entered.

"Is your brother here?" he inquired, taking a rapid survey of the room—"your brother that was, I should say."

"My brother that is—and always will be, Mr. Stewart."

"Oh! very good," he replied; "but I wish you would not be in such a hurry to fire up in his defence. 'Pon my soul, he *is* a sneak! Now, here's a roundabout way to go to work, instead of manfully saying that he was wrong, and trying to clear

me. Perhaps you'll be kind enough to offer me your opinion upon *that.*"

He placed upon the table a green slip of paper, which, taking up, I found to be a cheque signed by A. Z. and filled in thus—

"*Pay to Richard Stewart, or bearer, the sum of two thousand pounds.*"

"This is mysterious," I murmured.

"Not a bit of it," affirmed Richard Stewart, "it's humbug, nothing more. Don't you see what this is done for?"

"It is the money sent back at last."

"Oh! yes, it's the money sent back at last," he said with most uncourteous mimicry of my accent; "and in case I should make a mistake, the party sending it has written *conscience-money* on the inside of the envelope. And of all the damned roundabout nonsensical way of doing things, this beats all!"

"For shame, sir! You believe that John Kingsworth sent you this."

"Of course I do. He sends a cheque to London to some friend of his, who writes out another cheque for the amount and posts on to me. He thinks that I shall fancy the

repentant thief—I don't believe in repentant thieves, the age has grown too callous—has taken pity on my share of suspicion. It's an odd idea," he added with a short laugh; "I pay Mr. Kingsworth the two thousand pounds now with his own money, and there's an end of the mystery!"

Taking the cheque from me, he appeared to hesitate about tearing it asunder, altered his mind and replaced it in his pocket.

"In the first place, Mr. Stewart, my brother has no friend in London with whom he could trust two thousand pounds."

"He chanced it."

"In the second, this must have been posted—"

"Oh! we know all about that, Miss Casey. And in the third place——"

"In the third place, I have another proof which tends to clear my brother's innocence, and if you, after this, still assert his guilt to me, I never wish to see or speak to you again."

"Now, you're getting in a passion!"

"You are unjust—and injustice always angers me."

"Very right of it indeed," he said coolly;

"now for the third and last conclusive evidence."

I related the particulars of my journey to Edinburgh, and the conversation that I had heard and intruded upon in the railway carriage—a story of two thousand pounds again.

"A coincidence," he remarked, but he assumed an extra degree of thought notwithstanding.

"One of the men I saw at your brother's house on the following morning."

"Miss Casey, if you must know the whole truth of that matter, it was three thousand, one hundred and twenty pounds which that man received; it was a debt of my brother's, pressed for with many threats of arresting him and hindering all explanation with his creditors, and I paid *that* myself."

"You did not recognize the man in the carriage?"

"No, I did not," he said blankly; "how the deuce was that, now?"

"He was a second creditor, perhaps—I heard them speak of two creditors having been paid that day."

"In that case I must have paid the second man

in my sleep—I see now," he said ironically, "your brother is blameless, and I am the guilty man! But then, Miss Casey, if the money were paid as a fair and honest debt of my brother Mark's, why is it sent back to me as conscience-money? Do you think that creditor would be very much cut up by the complications of the story?"

I could have cried with vexation at his getting the better of the argument; the real facts became a greater mystery by the return of the money, and I gave up reasoning with him.

"Think what you please, Mr. Stewart," I said; "but give me leave to believe in my own version of the story."

"Miss Casey, I am glad that you believe in Mr. Kingsworth's word—I admire your fidelity. It's what I would do for Mark."

"Whom you mistrust also."

His face darkened at this.

"Whose policy I disapprove, would have been the kinder way of putting it," he corrected. "I don't mistrust him. But you are hard upon me since I cannot see every virtue under the sun in Mr. Kingsworth."

Richard Stewart took an unceremonious departure; he went back in the direction of the Hall. I knew that he was going in search of my brother, to rake up the ashes of the old fire, in the vain attempt to discover the secret.

I was sure of it, before John Kingsworth came in the evening to my house, and threw himself wearily into a chair facing me.

"I wish I had a woman's patience—a woman's trust."

"You have seen Richard Stewart again?"

"Yes. He will have no mercy on me. He is a stern doubter, and believes only in facts—or he is a great schemer."

"No—no."

"His persistence makes me doubt him in my turn. He has invented another story, to palm off that two thousand pounds upon me. If he be all that is honest and true, why invent so palpable a lie?"

"You do not believe that he has received this cheque?"

"Not for an instant. He is anxious to pay me two thousand pounds in some way or other. Yes-

terday's attempt proving a failure, he invents these out-of-the-way means."

"You have not taken the money, then?"

"No—I have declined to accept it, or a portion of it. If he pay it to my banker's account, I must remit it once more to him by letter. If he attempt the same a second time, my bankers will receive orders not to accept further monies from Richard Stewart. I am tired of this trickery."

He stayed with me all the evening, detailing his new plans, when he had sold the Hall, and was quit of a place wherein he had been unhappy. He would go abroad, and double his fortune, he thought. He asked Emma Eaves, sitting with us, what she thought of his plans; but she would not speak of them, although she had been listening eagerly with her hands clasped, and her work lying idly in her lap. She started up when questioned closely on the subject, and ran out of the room.

"What does this mean?" I asked.

"I can't tell," said Kingsworth, gloomily; "even the old friends are beginning to turn against me in this cursed village."

He went home dissatisfied; the next day he was at my house again.

"Come with me to Richard Stewart's," he said; "I want you as a witness, to mark that man's demeanour very narrowly, and see if you can believe in the new idea which I have formed concerning him."

"Has anything fresh happened?"

"More child's play. Great heaven! what a fool Richard Stewart must think I am!"

These two thousand pounds, which had verged once on tragedy, seemed approaching fast to comedy. Here was another phase of it. Kingsworth did not attempt any explanation.

"Wait till we see this Stewart," he said; "it will save telling a story twice over."

We found this Stewart sitting at his own cottage window, writing busily. His books were out, and his hand was travelling rapidly over the paper. He was making out the final account of his stewardship, preparative to going away for good. Possibly he was not prosecuting his task without a pang, for he had grown attached to the place, and to a few within it; his was not a roving disposition,

that took pleasure in change. His stern face turned towards the garden as the click of the wicket-gate announced our approach to him. Seeing Mr. Kingsworth with me, he rewarded our visit with a scowl of more than extra significance.

"May we come in?" asked my brother.

"The door is not shut—come in if you have any business with me."

We entered. Richard Stewart rose and placed a chair for me. He left Mr. Kingsworth to find one for himself; but John remained standing with his bailiff.

"Mr. Stewart," John said petulantly, "I am tired of this folly. I am even astonished that a man of your acuteness should be full of these petty, shallow tricks."

"Confound it, man!" exclaimed Stewart, "do you expect me to keep two thousand pounds that don't belong to me?"

"Do you expect me?"

"Your estate was robbed of that amount by my carelessness—how many more times am I to assert that as the basis of my argument?" shouted Richard Stewart. "You refused the money

yesterday—even the money which you sent me yourself!—and I paid that sum into your bankers at Woundell yesterday afternoon. If I take it back, may I——"

"Paid money into *my* bankers!" exclaimed my brother. "How much?"

"Two thousand pounds."

"Oh! then, *this* is the first two thousand pounds with which you worried me, that I found upon my breakfast-table this morning?"

"What?" asked Richard Stewart, dreamily.

"That makes four thousand pounds lavished upon me by your liberal hand. Two thousand that I did *not* send you, placed to my credit yesterday—two thousand pounds at my elbow this morning."

"Sit down, will you," said Stewart, dropping into a chair, leaning his elbows on the table, and holding his head between his hands, to more intently study my brother's countenance. "Now, what the devil do you mean? Pardon, Miss Casey," he said, without turning his head in my direction, "but I am very interested in this new variation of *my master's*."

Kingsworth reddened at the contemptuous tone of Stewart's last words, but he sat down and faced the bailiff as adjured. The two men looked fiercely at each other now; each despising the other for the simple nature of his plans.

"I find two thousand pounds—four five hundred-pound notes—on my breakfast-table this morning, in a sealed envelope, bearing no superscription," said John.

"Very good—it pleases you to tell me so."

"It pleases you to ignore all knowledge of the money placed there."

"Certainly—the two thousand pounds are in your bankers' hands—this, I presume, is your plan to invent an excuse to foist the amount back on me. Very ingenious, but a trifle too transparent, to my taste."

"Richard Stewart, as a man of honour, or professing honour, will you tell me that you never put those notes on my table this morning?"

"As a man professing honour also," rejoined the land-bailiff, "will you tell me that all this is not pure invention?"

"On my soul, I found the money there this morning!"

"Then, on my soul, I never put it there!"

Richard Stewart and John Kingsworth continued to stare dreamily, each impressed by the other's decision, and yet each bewildered by this new phase of the old perplexity.

"Two men could not have stolen one amount, and been each resolved to pay back the whole sum," said Kingsworth. "I am lost now, if—if I can believe this statement."

"I think we had better not attempt to believe it," said Richard Stewart, in reply, "but try our best to find it out. You deny knowledge of this —so do I—suppose, for an instant, just for an instant, Mr. Kingsworth, that neither you nor I took this money. That the guilty man is so overwhelmed with his wickedness that he sends the amount twice over, as you say—once to me and once to you—to make sure of affording satisfactory reparation to all parties concerned. Who is the fellow?"

John Kingsworth shook his head; it was past all guessing at.

"Have you made any inquiry of your servants?"

"Yes—only you have been seen about the estate this morning."

"Confound!—why, it must be myself!" exclaimed Richard Stewart, "everything conspires against me, and the long chain of circumstantial evidence drags me down to earth."

"And this money?" asked my brother, taking out his pocket-book. "Will you——"

"Keep it back!" cried Stewart, jumping up, and brandishing his clenched fists in the air; "play this trick on a greater fool than I, Mr. Kingsworth, and begone!"

"I have not convinced you, then?"

"No."

"And you have not convinced me?"

"Possibly not. I am very busy just now, Mr. Kingsworth, if you will excuse me."

So we separated, and Richard Stewart, looking more ferocious than ever, was deep in his books when we went along the country road together.

"There is no making out that man," said John; "I must give it up. But what to do with the

money, I cannot hazard a conjecture. In one way or another it must get back into his hands. And yet I cannot look into that man's face and consider him a liar."

"He would not tell a lie to save his life, John."

"You have a very good opinion of this Mr. Stewart, Bertie," he said, regarding me intently.

"Yes. I have known him some years, now—I have always found him honest and true. To your mother, he was ever a faithful servant."

"Is it not possible that, distressed by his brother's losses in business, he might have drawn on my mother's account, and considered it a debt?"

"No—impossible."

"You are the best judge. I must leave to time the solution of the mystery. Let me speak of my old grievance."

"Life in Wilthorpe?"

"Yes. I said that I would come to the old friend, when I had matured my plans—they ripened suddenly last night, in that dreary house of mine. I shall leave at once for Edinburgh, and ask Mr. Stewart's advice."

"The life of a country gentleman is not to your taste—I see that," I remarked; "I do not fancy anyone town-bred, town-born, can make a true country gentleman."

"I cannot, at all events," said John; "therefore I shall marry Emma Eaves at once, and go away from here."

"I cannot say that you would act unwisely."

"Poor Em!" he said reflectively; "I think she must be doubtful whether I intend to keep my promise to her—even she in her heart cannot believe in my word. I see her changing day by day, becoming more reserved and strange. The girl who called me father when she was a child, the girl I could not see handed over to the parish assassins—or parish authorities, it's all the same—even she has lost her faith."

"No—you are wrong."

"Wrong again—and again Bertie Casey the better judge. Well, I put this to the test at once—I am going home with you to settle this case. Have you any objection to urge?"

"Not any," I replied; "she is a girl who understands you, who has been faithful to you all her

life. I do not think your higher station should deter her from this chance of happiness."

Home together, we found Emma Eaves arranging some flowers in a vase on my centre table.

John Kingsworth and I entered, and glancing askance at the former, Emma's colour changed. She read the coming revelation on John's face at once, like a true woman, whose instinct in these matters is always akin to the miraculous.

"You must be fairly tired of seeing me crawl in and out here, Em," he remarked; "but I have been telling Bertie that I am going away, and shall not trouble Meadow House much longer."

"Going away!"

"Yes; and I have come hither to-day to have a long talk about my way of going, and with whom."

I was at the door, trying to steal forth unobserved, and leave this odd pair of lovers to themselves, when Emma Eaves made a rush at me and held me back."

"No, don't leave me with him, please," she cried; "I have not the strength or the courage to hear what he has to say alone. I cannot tell him anything if you go away!"

It was not the natural timidity of the maiden anxious for the truth to escape, and yet nervous at its revelation; it was a frightened woman, to whom my presence would be a relief. I looked towards Kingsworth, who said,

"Stay, Bertie, if she wishes it."

"I knew that this would come some day—I thought that it might happen to-day, when I saw you two coming together up the road—and I have been trying to keep strong! But you will stay, Miss Bertha?—I have only hope in you, now."

Strange for this girl to assert so much—she who had turned from me at one period, thanks to Mr. Mannington.

"You and I are old friends, Em," said John; "you and I only a little while ago promised to take each other for better, for worse."

"Yes," she murmured; "but things were different then. You—you were not a gentleman!"

"I was John Kingsworth Casey, in whose good intentions you had implicit faith. When I was a fool you trusted me; when you were a child, and I a reckless man, you tried to keep me strong, and did your best to make me better, suc-

ceeding now and then, and failing very often, Em."

"Oh! the old days!—the old days!" wailed Emma.

"You have been true to me—the only one who has had confidence in me throughout—and you are the only one fit to be my wife. When I left you to my sister's care, years ago, I had made up my mind to come back some day and marry you. Four months since you promised to be my wife—I claim that promise now."

"Four months ago I did not know that you were Mrs. Kingsworth's son."

"What difference does that make?"

"Every difference," said Emma. "I see it now —*she* saw it too before she died. She knew how poor, ill-born and ignorant I was, and what grand people you would know when you were rich. She saw that I should be a disgrace to you, and that you would tire of me and of the shame that I should bring you very soon. The thought of any marriage between us was making her unhappy, and I promised her, on her death-bed, never to be your wife!"

"You made that promise?" said Kingsworth.

"Yes, God help me, I knew that it was best, at last. That your world was not mine, and that I dared not share it with you, for your own sake. You, John, will marry a lady now, and I will stay with your sister till she marries, or we grow old together here. I am very—happy—as it is; I am not grieving at my promise to a dying woman, and for good or evil I will keep my word!"

John Kingsworth set a hand on each knee, and stared hard at the carpet.

"Very well," he muttered.

We were silent for a while—we three. The shadow of the dead woman's pride—or the pride itself that had lived after her—seemed to fall upon us in that little room. Was this true wisdom of her who had been gathered to her rest, or want of judgment even at the last? Through the glass darkly we were gazing at the future as well as at the past, and all was indistinct and blurred. The Kingsworths' pride had been my poor mistress's bane through life—was it to outlast her? In her narrow view of what was best for him, of whose character she knew so little, had she acted wrongly,

and was this last act for her son's sake, and in that son's interest, only to bear its bitter fruit after the old fashion?

He was looking at the carpet still, when Emma left my side to go to him. His trouble touched her, as no one else's ever could or would.

"John," she said, leaning over him, with her hands upon his shoulder, "if it had been different, no power on earth could have kept me from you. A life of trouble with you, poor and weak, and with me to care for you, would have never cost a sigh, but have made me—oh! so happy! I have always dreamed of that life, and looked forward to it—prayed for it, as a means of showing you my gratitude for all that past, wherein I was at least content, until you broke my heart by going away. John, I loved you very much!"

"Better than I deserved," he murmured.

"I will love you to the end," she said; "but now there is no chance of making *you* happy; now people would laugh at your ignorant, low-born wife; and women of a different kind to those I have ever known would taunt and despise me. *You* would share this humiliation, and wish some day

that you had done better. Don't ask me to break my promise to your mother."

"Had she a right to set this interdict upon my happiness?"

"I think so."

"You would be unhappy with me, Em?"

"Yes," was the mournful answer. "I should be suspicious every day of your tiring of me."

"*She* thought it best for me—I will try to think so too," he said, rising. "It is a very dull world, where no one comprehends what is best for me, or what is my place in it. Bertie, see to the girl, and try to comfort her. I have no power now!"

He went out of the house gloomy and stern—he had been balked in everything since his rise to greatness; the new world's friendship, honest men's belief in him, now this woman's love! Would he go back in desperation to his old life—he who was never strong, and whom a little always turned away from right? I feared the impulse—the nature of the new thoughts with which he quitted us.

"Emma," I said, "if you have done wrong—if this be a false step, of which you and I may bitterly repent!"

"No, no," she said, "it is right. For many reasons it is right. It is not as if he loved me!"

"Would he have asked you to become his wife?"

"He asked me out of gratitude for thinking well of him, for keeping true to him!" she cried, rocking herself to and fro upon the couch. "Not on acçount of any love for me. I could not expect that."

"Wrong there, Emma!"

"When he thinks calmly of this," she said, "he will be glad and grateful for my answer. I don't believe," she added, dashing her rebellious tears away, "that the right people ever marry each other—the woman loves the wrong man, or the man the wrong woman, and there's no real truth in both at once."

"Possibly," I added with a sigh.

"When you liked Mr. Stewart—he tired of you. Did he not?" she said eagerly.

"You knew—you knew that I liked *him!*"

"I found out—I was a listener, and the habit grew upon me till you broke me of it. I was doubtful who loved me and him I loved, and I

watched for both our sakes. I was more ignorant then than I am now; I was a spy, and I found out that Mr. Stewart was courting you. I kept your secret well—forgive me."

"I do not know that I have anything to forgive, Emma."

"Let me talk of this—let me try and think of something that will keep my thoughts of Jack away, or I shall go mad!" she cried impetuously.

"Courage, Emma—you have shown yourself a brave woman to-day."

"Have I not?" she replied; "you who gave up the man you loved, know that, and though he might have loved you after all——"

"No—don't tell me so!"

"He might. When his brother—that fierce man—and he quarrelled about you, and one taunted the other with seeking Miss Mannington only for her money——"

"*When was that?*"

A slight figure in deep mourning was standing in the doorway left open since Kingsworth's departure—she had halted on the threshold, where the shaft had struck her home, to gasp forth that

anxious question which had startled both of us.

"Isabel!" I cried.

"Don't move, Bertha—let me join you two gossips there," she said, speaking very hastily as she advanced; "when was it, Emma Eaves, that the brothers Stewart quarrelled about Miss Casey and me? I am very anxious to know!"

CHAPTER III.

APPROACHING THE TRUTH.

EMMA EAVES and I remained staring at Bel Mannington as at an apparition. It was the first time that she had visited Meadow House; and on that day in particular I had not dreamed of seeing her. When she and her father left the Hall for good, I found that we were set apart from each other more than I had anticipated—living but a mile away, she was still strangely sundered from me.

When I was thoroughly "settled" in my new home, I had resolved to alter this; to do all in my power, until she married and went away for good, to keep alive that affection that had existed between us since her love engagement. It had been an affection before that time, despite her rebellious

"airs and graces," for the matter of that; she was a wild lovable girl, in whom I had been always interested. When I was "settled," then, I had resolved to pay more frequent visits to Mr. Mannington's new house, despite Mr. Mannington's dislike to me, rather more apparent since Mrs. Kingsworth's death. I should go for Bel's sake, not her father's; and whilst Bel's heart was true, the frowns or slights of Bel's protector would not keep me at arm's length from her.

We met at Wilthorpe Church, whence Mr. Mannington hurried his daughter away; he stood between her and me whenever the opportunity presented itself; in his cunning face I read, despite its blandness, an eternal opposition. There remained no more to hope or fear; his sister who had had confidence in me was dead, and he could offend her no more by his true colours. Yet those colours were not flaunted in my face; he was naturally reticent, and when there was no avoiding me, he still put on his set smile, and expressed the pleasure that he felt at meeting me. But he seemed anxious to keep his daughter to himself; possibly I was beneath him

now, and this was one more trait of the pride which appertained to the family.

Still I knew that unless Bel Mannington was strangely altered, we should meet, despite all opposition; Bel had a will of her own, that was stronger than her father's, and a determined attempt to assert it bore down all hindrance in her way. Her father's nervous organization was the weak point in his character; had he been a man more physically strong, he would have made an excellent villain for a story-book. He possessed a plotting brain, no sympathy with others, and a very small amount of principle—if those confounded nerves had only been less in his way!

And here, at last, was Bel Mannington in the flesh before me. Fate was against her—good fortune was against her, when she crossed the threshold that day.

"Please tell me this story," she said—"I will listen very patiently."

Bel Mannington took no heed of my outstretched hands, but passed me and dropped into a chair by Emma's side, assuming, suddenly and unnaturally, that patient deportment she had promised us. This

girl, whom I had known so wayward and impetuous in her time, clasping her hands in her lap, and becoming quiescent, almost statuesque, was a novel sight to witness. But for the two red spots upon her cheeks, and the intense eagerness in her dark eyes, one might have thought her as patient as she wished to seem.

"What is this about Mr. Stewart quarrelling with his brother?—of what did Richard Stewart accuse his brother?—what about *me?*"

"Oh! don't ask," cried Emma, wringing her hands; "I never thought of telling that! I never thought until a little while ago that it was true, for I don't like Richard Stewart."

"He is a man to be trusted," said Bel Mannington; "he is a man in whom his brother has always trusted. Tell me all."

Emma looked at me, and I could but signify my assent. The secret, such as it was, had escaped. If I had not believed in it when Richard Stewart first tore down the screen between me and the light—I who had been deceived!—it was more than possible that Isabel Mannington, she who had been loved by Mr. Stewart, would, in her

proud assertion of faith, reject a thought of his unworthiness. I would have done so under similar circumstances, I thought—forgetting what a weak and jealous woman I had once proved myself. Emma Eaves thus adjured stated the few facts of which she was cognizant, anxious, for the sake of the girl whom she had loved for her very resemblance to herself, to put them in their best light. Isabel heard her to the end in the same patient manner, only once interrupting her by a quick "You are extenuating," when Emma hesitated to dwell too minutely upon the angry words between the brothers Stewart. I broke in here with,

"These are words, Bel, not worth receiving as evidence. Heard as they were, feloniously, I protest against their acceptance."

"They were spoken," said Isabel; "it is too late for Emma and me to be delicate in this matter. My future depends upon the truth, Miss Casey."

Long ago Isabel Mannington had abjured that formal designation, and it sounded ominously at that time. But I was awaiting my explanation afterwards, and hoping for the best with it.

"Go on, Emma," said Bel, impatiently.

"Richard Stewart was very angry; he swore that whilst the engagement lasted between you and Mr. Stewart, he would never speak to Mark again, or consider him his brother. He called him a villain to leave Miss Bertha and take up with you so suddenly. I heard no more, and I have always thought that it did not matter much what Richard Stewart said. You who know his brother Mark so well need not——"

"Silence! Do you think I want consolation from you!" cried Bel, with her old impetuosity, "or that I cannot judge for myself what is true or false? Oh! Bertie!" she cried, with a sudden resumption of her past affection, "you will help me in this, which can't be true—not wholly true!"

"I do not believe it is truth—it is all a mistake, Bel."

"I am very glad to hear you speak thus confidently. Mark never—never thought of *you*, then?"

"Not in his heart, perhaps."

"But he never asked you to love him, did he?" she exclaimed, vehemently.

"Unfortunately, yes."

"When—when was that?"

"Bel, you must listen as patiently to me as you have done to Emma Eaves, and I will tell you *my* story. May I entreat your patience?"

"I am learning to be patient! I thought that I had lived down all my old ways, but find I am mistaken. Are the old habits coming back with the old life?" she asked, with a perceptible shudder at the thought.

"No—you are safe."

My emphatic assertion conveyed no fresh assurance to her heart; her dark face was turned more anxiously towards me, that was all. She was restless still; the presence of Emma Eaves was a restraint upon her, and before I had commenced she had waved her hand imperiously towards her to withdraw, as though Emma were still the maid from whom obedience was expected.

Emma went away on the instant; she was anxious to be alone in her room, despite her past assertion that thinking of her own troubles would drive her mad.

When we were alone together, I told Bel Man-

nington the history of my past engagement; how it had begun, and even ended, before she was a woman—with that slight figure fronting me, she looked scarcely a woman even yet!—how it had been a hasty step on Mr. Stewart's part, a foolish step on mine; how I had grown jealous of him when he was back in Edinburgh, and she saw him so frequently; how the dream had ended in the ball-room at Woundell, and I had stepped back from dream-land to reality.

"And you and he have both studiously concealed this from me!" she said, reproachfully. "Have both kept in the dark one entitled to know all. You, too, above all others, Bertie Casey!"

"Pardon me if I have been wrong, Bel," I urged, touched by this reproach, "but—but it was the story of my humiliation, my ambition thrust upon my baffled self. I was ashamed to speak of it—to own to you who had gained his love, how I had lost it!"

"He should have told me, then—it would have been more honourable," she said, thoughtfully.

"He—he might have wished to respect my wish to keep this secret—it was an avowal that could

do no good, and from which might evolve much harm."

"Much harm!—ah! that's true."

She wrung her hands together, and then turned upon me again that gloomy, perplexed face. The truth was distracting her; thoughts at which I could but guess were stealing to her mind, and stabbing her with the reminiscences they conjured up.

"Lately," she said, in a husky whisper, "my father has spoken, or tried to speak, disparagingly of him to whom I am engaged. He has discovered something about Mark's business that is not satisfactory, and would set between me and Mark money-considerations. As if I cared for money, or thought of money, with the man I have loved from a child! Oh! Bertie," flinging herself suddenly at my feet, and burying her face in my lap, "you don't know how I have loved that man, how he, and he alone, has been in my heart before all on earth—myself, my God, everything! I have made an idol of him, and am justly punished. I see the retribution coming at me step by step, to strike me down!"

"Hush!—hush!" I said; "there, now you are giving way, and becoming the old Bel Mannington, who used to trouble me so much. You who should be ever strong with this strong man's love."

"As *you* would have been?"

"Yes."

"Without it you can live—and I should die!"

She was the old Bel Mannington, indeed, now—extravagant, passionate, and uncontrollable. They came back again, all those past days when she was younger, and I was a more hopeful woman—in my ears there seemed to ring again Mrs. Kingsworth's warning to be careful of her, the wish that I should study her and live for her—back to my heart came the old affection to which her very wilfulness seemed to give new birth.

I bent over her, and clasped my hands about her neck assuringly.

"Bel, this is folly in you, who should be happy."

"No, no, don't tell me so! I am trying to escape a great truth, and you are buoying me up with fallacies. I see it now—*he* loved you!"

"Never!"

"You thought so once—the first thought was

the truer of the two. His brother, that terrible man who is never deceived, was sure of it, and I—I am sure of it now. He loved you, but he never loved me—never! never! never!"

"If now, thinking soberly of this, with my heart free, and my judgment unwarped by passion, I can believe that his love for you was the reason of our separation, why should you despair like this?"

"Bertie, you are a woman to be loved," she cried, "and I am a dark-faced, plain-featured child, perverse, fretful, discontented, with not one attribute that can attract a soul towards me but—my money! I have shut my eyes to this till now—I have been led along contented to believe in what my hopes gave birth to—and all is over with me for my blindness!"

"I will believe that your brightest days are yet in store—your brightest days with *him*."

She shook her head as she rose from her despairing posture with a sigh. I who had suffered like her, and understood her every heart pang, yearned to fold her in my arms again—to tell her how every thought antagonistic to her happiness,

was likely to be false, and should not be fostered for an instant until the truth beset her, or made all things light. And yet I had been so weak myself!

"Bertie," she said, "I am not a coward. No," with a poor attempt to manifest the pride she did not feel, and assert a fact in direct opposition to that cry of despair which had recently escaped her, "I am not afraid of the truth, and I will bear it like a true woman. Face to face with it, I will accept the separation, and demand justice for *her* whom alone he has a right to marry. I see ahead my proper course in life—I—I shall follow it un—flinchingly to the end!"

"Ask for no justice to me," I said proudly in my turn—so very proudly, that she shrank a step or two away; "he has no claim to my love. I have ceased to love him—I have long understood how right it was that he and I should part. Say no more concerning him."

"He has loved you—in his heart, he——"

"In his heart," I interrupted, "you will find him true to you, and this is idle folly, which your cold sense of justice might convert to tragedy.

You who love him should have more confidence in his honour."

"You had—and found your confidence misplaced," she said quickly; "this is the tale over again, to end in the same fashion. The truth—how can I find the truth?"

"Waiting for it with hope and patience—or searching for it, if you will, calmly and trustfully, believing in right, till the wrong is inevitable."

"How easy it is to advise others," she said wearily.

I did not answer. It was a just reproof, and in my place deserved.

The variable nature, disturbed by the truth looming before her, led her to my side again, flushed and excitable.

"A little while ago I should have hated you for this!" she said between her set teeth—"for keeping this secret from me, listening to my rhapsodies of how I loved that man, how I would die for him—I prating of my happiness to you, holding in your heart a secret that could prove how false and intangible my hopes were. A little while ago I would not have believed in your motives for keep-

ing this secret back—I would have stamped you after its avowal as my enemy, who exulting in a rival's future discomfiture, had let me go on smiling to my disappointment. But—but I have been tried—I know how weak and wicked my thoughts are, and to what ends they lead me—I read you as my friend still!"

She held both her hands out to me, and I clasped them in my own. Her face softened again and tears were in her big black eyes.

"I am a selfish woman. I see that I shall be presently alone in the world, and have need of you —that one by one, each man and woman will turn away, and there will be only you to pity and support me. Will you?"

"With all my heart and strength!"

"Then I will be a brave woman—I will fight this out!" she said with an impatient movement of the hands she disengaged from mine; "it will be a short battle. In a fortnight he will be in Wilthorpe —perhaps before that time if my letter rouse him to defend himself."

"*Don't write!*" I said hastily.

I remembered my own foolish letter and its re-

sult. I knew how impossible it had been not to betray my sense of mortification, my anger, my want of faith in him, and I feared all that might be recorded by her whose will was less governable than mine. There are no rightful explanations of love-troubles by letter—ye who see the storm coming up and clouding the sky, think of this warning, and bide your time hopefully in the sunshine still left you.

I was repeating my injunction to her, when Mr. Mannington, in a small four-wheeled chaise, drove up to the door. It was the first time that he had honoured my humble villa since Mrs. Kingsworth's death had parted us. He came in his old jaunty manner up the garden-path, leaving a small boy in buttons and with a cockade on his hat to attend to the horse.

"Say nothing to him," said Bel, casting a half-frightened, half-defiant look towards her father; "he would too readily believe this; and though I —I believe it already, yet it is hard to have no one to give you hope. Bertie, I will wait the fortnight before I write; but I must——"

Mr. Mannington was announced—Mr. Manning-

ton, looking spruce, and dapper in his glossy mourning. He came in, and shook hands with me in a demonstrative manner. Was I well? —Had I recovered the shock of his poor sister's death?—Was I quite sure that I was well?

I was more certain of my own health than of his own. His light step had only deceived me until his face was towards me and the window—then it struck me that it was very sallow, and the innumerable lines therein scored more deeply still.

"Anything wrong?" he asked, looking from his daughter to me with his usual quickness of perception.

"No—nothing wrong."

"You have been walking fast, Isabel; you should have waited for me, and not have—have flounced, I may call it, out of the house. Why, where are you going now?"

"Only a little way. Will you wait here till I come back?"

"Just as you please, my dear. It's a long while since I have had the pleasure of a little talk with Miss Casey."

Bel hurried out of the house; Mr. Mannington

went at once to the window, and watched her progress along the garden-path to the wicket.

"Why, she's going towards the Hall," he said.

I guessed then for the first time whither she was going. Richard Stewart, if still at work over his accounts, was doomed to further interruptions.

"Whatever can she want that way, now? You —you haven't heard that Mr. Stewart has come to Wilthorpe again?"

"I believe that he is still in Edinburgh."

"I have been distressed a great deal about this engagement, lately, Miss Casey," he said, as if in a seeming burst of confidence not to be withstood; "you cannot conceive how it is disturbing me."

"Why?"

He did not admire my dry rejoinder; and he did not reply at once. I was on my guard against him; I had long since learned to distrust him; he had done evil to me and mine; my brother's bad name in Wilthorpe was his doing, I was certain; and how much of my old troubles might be attributed to him?

After all, he was an over-cunning man, possessing great faith in his own ability to deceive,

and in the gullibility of those on whom it was his pleasure to work. This is the attribute of cunning men, more shallow or more deep than he. Mr. Mannington did not believe for an instant that I was not to be impressed by any manner he might assume; he was confident in his own powers, and a fair actor—nothing more.

"My daughter has told you, doubtless, how troubled I have been by this engagement?"

"She may have mentioned it."

"Mr. Stewart scarcely treated us as I could have wished," he said; "no man has a right to disguise his position in life, more especially to overestimate it, when seeking an alliance with an old and respectable house. And we all know very well now, that he was struggling to keep his head above water."

"A struggle that has at least ended satisfactorily."

"I don't know that—I don't see how it is possible to know that," he answered; "I have written once or twice for a full explanation of his position; he hasn't answered my second letter, which is dis-

courteous, to say the least of it. I never liked that man."

"And yet——"

I stopped. I would not allow myself to be led into any argument with Mr. Mannington.

"And yet, I agreed with my poor sister. Exactly —I always agreed with her, or she would have made my life a misery. She had set her heart upon this marriage—she had been always fearful of Isabel being impressed by a fortune-hunter or a fool; and, by George! she took him into the net herself, and I grinned at him through the meshes, and thought what a fine catch it was! Now, Miss Casey, do you believe for an instant that Mr. Stewart cares anything for *her?*"

"Yes."

"He cared for you once, you know?"

"Never in his heart."

"You thought so at the time I came express from Edinburgh to make sure that it wasn't anything more than a flirtation; to sound you, if I could, concerning him who did not treat you well—now, did he? Well, I have thought of asking you to tell Bel all the old news and the new, quietly and con-

fidentially. She will not believe anything I say against him—she's the most undutiful girl that ever worried a man to death."

"Why do you wish to stop Mr. Stewart's marriage with your daughter?"

"I don't wish it—if the marriage is for the best."

"Mrs. Kingsworth was right—it is for the best."

"Not if he don't love her—why do you, Miss Casey, take the unromantic side of the case? It's so unlike your sex, and, above all, so unworthy of you. And, besides, if he were disengaged now—"

"Please say no more. This is a distasteful subject; if you wish me to aid you in any way or shape against your daughter's happiness, you are mistaken in me."

"I am thinking only of her happiness, Miss Casey," he said with a dignity that would have deceived me had I not known him so well; "but you mistrust me. You have always distrusted me," he added; "in the early days of our acquaintance some one sowed the seeds of suspicion in your heart against me, and they have brought forth seed after their kind. It was to be expected."

He turned his back upon me, and looked out of the window as though he were offended with me, or with my want of appreciation of his merits. He was in that position when his daughter returned swiftly and suddenly into the room. He must have stood there quietly watching her approach, and studying her troubled face for several minutes.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes—ready now."

"Let us be going, then. Good day, Miss Casey."

He went out of the room and house towards his chaise. Bel Mannington, who had accompanied him, turned suddenly, and ran back to me, forcing me by my arms into the parlour.

"I have seen Richard Stewart—I have asked him for the truth—I have demanded, as my right, the truth, Bertie."

"Not from him, but from his brother, you must expect that."

"Why, is *he* false too?—would he deceive me?"

"No. But he has misjudged his brother—ignorant of all the facts of the case, he has leaped too readily to a conclusion."

Her lip quivered.

"You are kind to say so, but you do not give me hope *now*. There was a quarrel between you and Mark, and he sought me out of pique—out of pity, perhaps, if he guessed my love for him—or," with a shudder, "out of consideration for my future wealth. But I will be very strong, and very patient, Bertie, through it all. Let me lean upon your arm, or I shall never reach the chaise?"

We went out together, she leaning heavily upon me, as her aunt had done in the old days for ever away from us, Mr. Mannington watching our approach. She was very weak to bear the whole truth—if truth it were approaching her. By-and-bye, I felt then, by intuition, it would be my task to stand at her side again, and do my best to help her.

In Wilthorpe there might be trouble yet for both of us.

CHAPTER IV.

OTHER ATTENTIONS.

I WAS not aware until the next day that Mr. Mannington had started with his daughter to the seaside; that he had been solicitous about her health, and thought that change would do her good; that Bel Mannington had called to say good-bye to me, when Emma Eaves' unguarded word had fired the train which exploded love's security.

Love troubles were gathering thickly round me then; Emma Eaves had declined to marry my brother, for the world's sake or his own—it was doubtful which; Mr. Stewart's past intentions were still misty; I alone stood in the midst of these perplexities heart free. I had begun and ended early in life, I thought, and was not to be deluded any more. I should drop into quiet old maidism,

take shortly to spectacles and a large tabby cat, and settle for ever in my little freehold. I had no ambition to tempt me away from Wilthorpe, where there were many fair associations and some sweet memories. I found the interest on my five thousand pounds sufficient for all my wants, leaving me something to spare. All that I loved was in Wilthorpe yet, and if all I loved had been happy, I should have felt happiness in seeing theirs.

My brother John, as I may call him to the end of the story, went away next day; he sent me a letter, stating that he had departed for Edinburgh, but should shortly return, when he had sought advice from Mr. Stewart. He was unsettled again, and I feared somewhat when I learned from his letter that he had drifted from my sight. There was left me the task of consoling Emma Eaves, who tried hard to fly from consolation, and feared now all mention of my brother's name. After my own way—of which I was still vain, the reader perceives—I kept her from her old sorrowful wilfulness.

A few days after my brother's departure, Mr. Crease called. The reader still remembers the

curate of Wilthorpe, a gentleman concerning whom I have a little more to say ere I write FINIS to my love-story. Once again he steps upon the scene, to play the short part allotted him, and then go away for ever.

Though I have not intruded Mr. Crease upon my reader's attention, he was one of my most intimate friends in Wilthorpe; one whose good life, unselfish and pure, I had always admired, even endeavoured at a distance to imitate, failing miserably, after the rule governing all imitations. I believed, even before I was convinced of it by the after facts now to be narrated, that he had known of my past engagement to Mr. Stewart, been aware of its disruption, pitied me without embarrassing me, or bringing the colour to my cheeks—a rare and comfortable pity that!

He was still curate of Wilthorpe; he was an unambitious man, content with the stipend paid him by Mr. Gapwing, content—nay, glad to do the lion's share of work, and satisfied with the gratitude of those whom he benefited; a satisfaction in which he was occasionally balked by that perversity of human nature, common to Wilthorpe as to

greater places. Like myself, he had settled down to the village, and craved no further change. Great preachers, making the world ring with their oratory, did not raise his envy; to read of the livings flying from one to another, and of the salaries attached to them, suggested, perhaps, a thought of the good he might have done with the money—nothing else, I am sure. The old college friends, whom he had known once, and who might, on application, have thought of him and advanced him, his natural reserve held him aloof from; his father had died a bankrupt, and he had helped his mother with his income until she had followed her husband. After his mother had died he was absent for three weeks, and returned, looking aged and worn, as though grief had wrung his heart more acutely than it would have done most folk of small salaries with a poor mother off-hand.

He and I had become good friends enough then, and I mention his calling a few days after my brother's departure for the reason that he was talking of the parishioners to me, and of one parishioner in particular—who was very refractory, as well as unfortunate, who wanted more attention

paid to him in his distress, more money for his needs, and less talk about the church, in which he had not been seen since his christening—when Richard Stewart walked up to my open window, and coolly put his head through the fuschias and fancy geraniums. Mr. Crease, who had been nursing his hat on his knees, gave a little leap in his chair at this sudden intrusion.

"Oh! I didn't know that you were engaged," Richard Stewart said, jerking his head back again with too much precipitancy, and bringing the back of it against the window-frame.

"Pray come in, Mr. Stewart."

"Any time will do for me," he said, without looking back in my direction, as he stalked down the garden path, "it's nothing particular—sorry to disturb you and the parson."

He appeared to have his brother's objections to the clergy that morning. Mr. Crease heard the remark, and when I turned round I found him quite scarlet in the face.

He gave a feeble little laugh, however.

"Very abrupt I have always found Mr. Richard Stewart, Miss Casey."

"Yes, he is abrupt at times."

"Very unlike his brother in that way, but I—I don't know whether I admire his brother more than he, for that matter. We shall all be sorry when Richard Stewart goes away."

"Has he spoken of going away?"

"He leaves your brother's service shortly, I believe. I think there is no doubt that he will go to Edinburgh, and make a fortune after his brother's fashion. He has been lost in Wilthorpe—his energy takes my breath away completely at times. By the way, did you ever understand him thoroughly?"

"I think I understand him—not always, perhaps."

"The villagers don't understand him—some call him hard and unsympathetic; others, and they are the best sort, speak well of him and of the help he has been to them in real trouble, for all his scoldings of them—and in real trouble we find our best friends, Miss Casey."

"Yes."

"Therefore, for many reasons, I shall be sorry to see the back of Richard Stewart, despite the contempt with which he treats me out of the

pulpit. I shall call at his cottage to-night, and have a long talk with him. I fancy he has grown more serious of late, and something may be troubling him which I may be able to set right."

I doubted Mr. Crease's power to set right any troubles of Richard Stewart; but I did not damp his hopes upon the subject. Next day I anticipated a visit from the latter, but he did not call upon me. In the evening, and in the village, I met, not Mr. Stewart, but Mr. Crease again. Mr. Crease was walking in the middle of the road, with his hands behind him, and his face bent downwards—a fashion in walking which he had adopted from his first coming to Wilthorpe. Meeting suddenly with the curate was always to confuse him; my "Good evening" caused a scuffling of his feet in the roadway, an elevation of his hat, a suffusion of colour to his cheeks.

"Goo—goo—good evening, Miss Casey," he said; "what an exceedingly fine evening, to be sure. Are you going home?"

"Yes, sir."

"I—I really should like to go with you a little way, if you don't mind *much*," he added.

I did not mind; and though I was surprised at his offering me his arm, I had no suspicion of a truth advancing towards me until the silence following upon his polite attention suggested one disturbing thought. Then that thought with me and before me, kept me silent in turn, revolving what was best, most prudent, and most kind!

Mr. Crease began suddenly clearing his throat with great vehemence.

"Miss Casey," he said, "I am going simply and straightforwardly to trust you with a little secret of mine. It's very foolish of me, you'll say—but it's as well to put myself out of suspense concerning such a matter, and be the same as usual, or—or something dearer. Miss Casey, I'm really going to ask you to take me for a husband?"

"Oh! dear—I am very sorry," I replied.

"Yes, yes—ahem! I thought you would be. I'm sorry now that I have asked you, or that I did not ask you before Mrs. Kingsworth left that money to you; but you—*you* will not think I had *that* in my head?"

"No, sir—not for an instant."

"I—I don't think that I am very mercenary—

at least, the idea has not struck me before, though a man is naturally a bad judge of his own character. You must forgive me, Miss Casey; but I fear that I have taken you by surprise with my avowal—and, perhaps—*oh! dear!*—you may want time to just think of this a little more. I don't know when I began to love you—I fancy it was the day I saw you at the dinner-party; but then—then, some-one else was in the way, a more clever man than I, and one more suited to you, and I saw how little hope there was for me. But when something parted you two—although I was very sorry to see your altered looks—I did hope that you would be free from regrets in time, and perhaps some day think of *me*; or, pardon me for thinking too much about you. God forgive me, I fear it was too much at times!"

"I am sorry that——"

"Yes, yes—you said so before," he hastened to add; "pray don't say it again—it makes my heart sink to hear it. I know how presumptuous all this is on my part, I who haven't a friend in the world who would assist me to rise in it, and still have the impudence to ask you to marry me, and be always

poor for my sake. It's not only presumptuous, but preposterous! Still, I did think very often of what a good wife you would make me—how happy at least I would have tried to make you, if you had ever married me. I—I haven't offended you, Miss Casey?"

"No, sir. A woman is never offended by an honest profession of attachment. But—forgive me saying it, Mr. Crease—I am very sorry to find that you have thought of me in connection with your future. I could not have made you happy —I could not have done my duty as a minister's wife—I could not—forgive me again—have loved you as you deserved!"

"I would have chanced that. I would have waited, prayed for your love; and I think that in good time, and with God's grace, it would have come."

"It can never be, sir," I murmured. "I am not the woman whom your fancy has depicted. I am an irritable and jealous woman, disguising my discontent by forced composure, and living within myself a life of unrest which it is beyond my power to subdue."

"You are unhappy—you love Mr. Stewart still. Oh! pray forgive me, I did not think that!"

"Do not think it now, sir, if you have any esteem for me. It is not true."

"I will not think so, then. But *you* unhappy!"

"Not unhappy—learning to be content even—looking forward to my own better life; but still irritable and always unworthy."

"If——" he began, when I checked him.

"You will consider my answer final, Mr. Crease—you will think it best that we should be friends, commonplace acquaintances."

"I suppose we shall never be really friends after this again," he said ruefully.

"I hope we shall. I will forget that you have ever given a thought to me."

"Thank you—you are very kind—you will forget more easily than I shall. It is natural," he added with a little sigh.

He did not press his suit further; he read the hopelessness of its nature in my answer to him, and he changed the topic of conversation. But it was an ill attempt that night to drift into another channel; on his part it was a miserable failure.

The depth of his voice, the embarrassment of his manner, all betrayed his disappointment, and when we were near Meadow House he darted at a tangent back to the interdicted subject.

"You *will* try and not think the worse of me for all that I have said to-night," he stammered. "I was rash in alarming you—I should have considered the matter a few years longer—or made more evident the state of my feelings as regarded you. It should have been my place to judge from your demeanour whether it were politic on my part to attempt a confession. But I was never a wise man; you *will* forget all this, Miss Casey."

"I am only sorry that you should not have thought of some one——"

"There, please don't say anything about being sorry again," he said, hastily; "we'll forget it, both of us, and be friends. Good evening."

"Good evening, Mr. Crease."

He held my hand in his, and hoped once more that I should not think the worse of him for betraying the secret of his love to me; then he went away, strangely humble and downcast. It was but

a few paces from my house now, and I went forwards very thoughtfully towards it; the evening had deepened, and the crescent moon was shimmering above me—all was peaceful and still—a strange contrast to that night when Mr. Stewart made known *his* intentions, and won my heart, only to disregard its love.

I was depressed in spirit; I regretted the power that I had had to disappoint so good a man as he who had just quitted me, and the want of foresight that had not detected the warmth of his attachment, and checked it in its early days. But he had been always grave, matter-of-fact, and kind; earnest in his duties, and neglecting nothing for them; the smile and soft words that he had had for me, he had had for all with whom he had come in contact. He had been ever to my knowledge a true gentleman and a good Christian, and I had not associated him with my past worldliness.

I had told him the truth when I had spoken of being an irritable and jealous woman; the reader has seen me at my best. My heart's despondency, or its rebellion, I have not always set upon paper

to him who has followed this biography. I had tried to feel content, and I was very sure of being content presently, but there was not peace within me yet. They with whom my life had been lately spent were separating one from another, and there was mystery in their midst still.

Looking up at last as I reached my garden fence, I was a little startled to find Richard Stewart standing with his back against the wicket, his cap tilted forwards over his eyes, his arms folded in bravo-fashion on his broad chest. He quite made me jump to come thus suddenly upon him.

"I had no idea that you were so close at hand, Mr. Stewart."

"No, I suppose not. Probably you thought that I had left Wilthorpe without saying good-bye to you—that was more like me and my ways."

"You haven't come to say good-bye now?" I asked.

"Yes, I have," he said, bluntly. "I've kept my word, and given up my post. I'm as free as air to-night!"

He did not say it in an exultant manner; but

in a deep angry voice, that told of the change affecting him.

"Then you leave Wilthorpe as well as my brother's service?"

"Of course. What have I to stay here for?"

"Nothing."

"Mark will be here to-morrow or the next day. And I don't care," he added, moodily, "to see *him*."

"You bear malice against him yet?"

"If to pray for his success in life, his health, his happiness, is malice—yes."

"But——"

"But I have disowned him for a brother, whilst he acts a part at variance with his nature. The end is approaching, now Miss Mannington has even cause for suspicion. Mark and I will be good friends again, perhaps; I may come back here to bid him welcome to his old self—I hope so. What's that parson had to say to you?"

This question followed so rapidly upon his remarks on Mark, and was put so suddenly, that I coloured, and lost my composure for an instant.

"Don't let him follow you about, and talk his

smooth nonsense to you, Bertha Casey," he said, sternly; "he dogs your steps; he is like all priests, Protestant or Roman Catholic, sly, quiet, and insidious, stealing his way towards a woman like a fox!"

"Sir!"

"Oh! you may fire up if you like!" he said, elevating his voice at my remonstrance, "but I won't have this black-frocked fellow marrying you —this inane old-fashioned beggarly curate, who is imposed upon by every man and woman that chooses to whine forth a complaint. He should have been born a girl, and worn frilled trousers!"

"Have you been waiting here to tell me this?" I asked, in the most cold and cutting manner I could assume.

"No. But waiting here, I find you coming up the road together, arm in-arm, quite a pretty picture in the moonlight. And it must not be!"

"Good night, Mr. Stewart."

"I say it must not be!" he vociferated, catching at my arm as I attempted to pass him; "you must not be flattered by the attentions of a good man; these good men who preach in pulpits are as selfish

and inconsistent as ourselves, and you would be miserable and unhappy with a man like Crease. Besides—besides," he repeated, "you have not forgotten my brother, and he may not have forgotten you. On his side an earnest repentance, and on yours the old love which he did not understand, or understood too well. Miss Casey, I must speak for him yet, whilst there is time. Do you hear?"

"I hear that you insult me. Let me go."

"I would sacrifice all for Mark's happiness," he said, not heeding my reproof, or my demand, "and I have been picturing a brighter time for all of us than this. But if you don't like Mark now, why, all the vivid colouring dies away, and I have no power to stop it."

"Your brother must marry Miss Mannington—if you attempt to sow dissension between those two, you are a villain!"

"I stand apart from both of them; I have been asked one question by Miss Mannington, and have given her the truth in reply—if that is villainy, I have committed it."

"Will you leave go my wrist now, Mr. Stewart?"

"Yes—but don't run away without saying good-bye," he said, releasing his hold. "I am not here to exchange angry words, in a parting that may be very long between us both—I came here in all sorrowfulness of heart to say good-bye, and then that creeping Crease skulks up the road with you, and I feel full of hatred and uncharitableness. I'm cooling down now!"

"If you had cooled down before, you would have spared me thinking less of you from this night."

"What do you think of me now, then?"

"That you are always unjust, vain of those opinions which in your own estimation can never be faulty, which lead you to suspect men better than yourself, and insult women who have not the strength or power to defend themselves."

"*Whew!*" said Richard Stewart, letting his arms fall to his side with the weight of my bitter words—I did not know how bitter they were, until I had thought them over again, and repented them; "It is time I went away from here! Now the worst is over, I can look back and see the road I should have taken long ago. I am unjust—I am a

villain—I insult a woman, and am a coward, deserving of such womanly scorn as yours! With that last greeting for my farewell words, I bid you good-bye, Miss Casey."

He raised his cap from his head, and turned away, leaving me rooted to the spot, and watching him, despite of me. He went on, never looking back in my direction—never, perhaps, to think of me again. In a parting that he had thought would be very long between us, both had had no mercy, but had hacked and hewn at each other's best thoughts, as though we would deface all gentler memories before we went our separate ways. If he had been ungenerous, I had been cruel; he was excited and had spoken hastily; and though I was not to see him any more, I could not forgive him or restrain my harshness. I was an irritable and jealous woman—I had told Mr. Crease so that night. It was a true verdict on myself, and I accepted it, in shame and in tears.

CHAPTER V.

AMENDE HONORABLE.

I WAS more sorry the next morning that I had parted ill friends with Richard Stewart, than on the night preceding. We had been both in the wrong; but I, a woman whose mission was to forgive and to think before I spoke hastily, was more to blame than he. In the morning, with the bright sunlight on my thoughts, I felt this as acutely as in the night-time when I had held counsel with my conscience, and judged myself unsparingly.

Setting aside his foolish, hasty criticism on a good man—a criticism that in his better mood he would heartily repent himself—what had he done? He had shown once more his love for his brother, his anxiety for his happiness; he had come to bid me

hope of Mark again, believing that I valued my old love still, and that time, at the expense of poor Bel Mannington, would bring us once more together, and end all happily for me! It was just possible that this persistence in setting down Mark Stewart for me, had engendered more anger than his fierce attack on the curate of Wilthorpe; that this belief in his brother's power to make my heart leap, had rendered my tongue unruly and unmerciful. I had been given up for good, when Mark Stewart cancelled our engagement; I had been strengthened by my woman's pride to think no more of him, when his new love for Isabel had set a barrier irrevocable between us. After that he grew out of my liking, and all the powers in the world, and all the love-philtres of old story-books, could not have brought him back again.

Then to think of all this in the sober morning was to pain me very much; to think of Richard Stewart going away "for good," with such last words as mine ringing in his ears, was to cancel every fair remembrance that he had had of me. Long ago he had been like a dear brother —kind, considerate, and watchful, and I did not

care to forfeit his respect by words of which in less angry moments I repented.

I was sorry, and I resolved on the difficult, even humiliating task of telling him so, if he had not already left the village. I would simply inform him that I had not spoken from the heart last night; that I regretted his departure from Wilthorpe, and wished him well in his new life. I would shake hands with him, and bid him farewell decorously. Over my breakfast I was beset with the fear that he had already left Wilthorpe, and that the chance was lost to me; he would not have come to say good-bye last night, had he not purposed leaving at a very early hour that morning. Still I would proceed to his cottage, and not lose a chance. Making the attempt to bury the war-hatchet, was better than sitting idly there, staring at my distorted face in the tea-pot. I dressed myself hastily, and set forth alone upon my journey. It was another fair, sunshiny day, giving promise of heat and drought very shortly. I went along the road towards the Hall quite nervously; I had never proceeded on so exceptional a mission as that of begging pardon for past

offences, and promising never to do so again! I did not know how proud I really was until that day. Had it not been for the consciousness of little time to spare, of the probability of Richard Stewart's departure, I should have turned back even at the last, and trusted to the future to soften all bad impressions left with the land-bailiff. The bend of the road brought the cottage in sight—when I saw the shutters closed upon the lower windows, my heart sank very much—until it leaped into my throat by a voice very close to my ears!

"Where are you going, Miss Casey?"

It was Richard Stewart, who had been following me, or striving to overtake me, for the last five minutes.

"I have been in the village—then I came back to your house, and Emma Eaves told me that you had gone out, which I did not believe, until I caught sight of you along this road."

"What did you want with me?" I asked.

I forgot my first resolve—my good and amiable intentions. I was far more curious to know for what reason he had called at Meadow House that morning—rather vexed that I had not stayed at

home a little longer, and not been caught hurrying as for my life towards his cottage.

"I'll tell you!"

We continued to walk towards the Hall; he was at my side now, and looking at me.

"When I got home last night," he began, "I did not feel any the happier for your last words, or any the more satisfied with my behaviour. I had intended to reach Peterborough at an early hour, but yesternight's parting stopped me, and one day, after all, made little difference. I had done wrong, and whenever I do wrong I try to make all the atonement in my power. That's fair, isn't it?"

"Yes—that is fair," I echoed.

"I found this morning that I could not go away leaving you impressed with my viciousness, and rudeness. I was a country clown, who had taken offence at something which did not concern me; and I had offended you, and behaved altogether like—like a beast as I am!"

"Mr. Stewart, I forgive you every word that you uttered last night."

I was a hypocrite. I was very glad that it was

in my power to offer forgiveness and not to ask for it—glad that it had all ended so satisfactorily for me. But I was exultant too soon, as his next words proved.

"And you, who were angry with me for my insolence, did not exactly mean all that you said? I shall never forget those words—they are hissing in my ears now, horribly! You did not mean them?"

I made the *amende honorable* then. It was my duty, and I had gone forth that morning to fulfil it. The task had become more easy than I fancied.

"No, I did not mean them! But you were ill-tempered, and I was cross and vixenish; you must not think anything more of last night."

"Thank you, Miss Casey, for saying this; I don't care how soon I go now—*this* was worth stopping for!"

I almost wished that he would leave me now; we were better friends, and there was nothing more to say. Presently, I should have to turn round and confess that I was walking along that country road without a single object in view!

"May I speak about Mr. Crease again?" he asked, quite humbly.

"If you will spare me any harsh comments upon a man who is good, honest, and pure-minded."

"He's a good fellow," said Richard Stewart, rapidly; "too mild and simple for this world. I regret that I said one word against him; but he—he put me out of temper last night."

"Because he walked home with me?"

"Exactly. You were absent, and I waited at the gate till your return, thinking of my parting with you, wondering if you would be sorry at my going, if I could speak a word for Mark, if you ever thought of Mark now, and I could only find out that before I went away—half a hundred such thoughts of these all distracting me, making me feel very miserable and unsettled when *that*—that friend of yours came up the road with you!"

"And you dislike him?"

"I did not feel very much inclined to love him last night. Only a few days since I found him quite at home in your parlour; yesterday he was with you once more, and I could see which way affairs were going with *him* at least."

I did not answer. He had seen more clearly than myself, and that was not pleasant to acknowledge.

"He finished me! He gave me the horrors. I knew that you had always respected him and his goodness, and that if he fell in love with you, pity, if nothing else, might take you into his arms. And watching him, I thought of you and Mark, and of what I had done for Mark, and felt savage to think that all was to end after another fashion! Miss Casey, are you going to marry Mr. Crease? Have you a thought that way? I have no right to put this question to you, save as the brother I was *once*."

"I have no intention of marrying Mr. Crease."

"He has asked you?"

"I cannot answer that."

"I will not press the question—I am too curious, and you are right to rebuke me. I talk to you, and seek to brow-beat you, as though you were one of poor Mrs. Kingsworth's tenants. You and Mark some day will——"

"I will not hear this!" I cried, losing my composure once more; "I will not have this coupling of our names together!"

"I shall return some day, and find you man and wife," he said, paying no heed to my remonstrance,

"Coming from abroad—perhaps, quite a traveller in my way—I shall open the door, and offer a hand to each of you, and you will laugh at me and say, 'After all, brother Richard, you were the true prophet!'"

"It will never be," I affirmed, "and you wound me very much by this constant reiteration of a painful subject."

"Miss Casey, it must be," he said, very firmly; "pardon me a few more words, but I think it *will* be some day. Miss Mannington is not fit for him, and his true self will come back—there is too much nobility of soul in him to keep it down. His is a transition state. When long ago I advised you to give him up, I meant in my heart only for a while, till he had less to trouble him. For that reason, when you were parted, I hoped on, even when he was engaged to Miss Mannington, and we had quarrelled. Before all, I saw that you and he would meet again—that you had not forgotten him. When I discovered—don't be very much alarmed at this, for I am going to vanish away from you in a minute—that I thought too much of you myself, and that you were the only

woman in the world with whom I could have known happiness, I fought hard for Mark's sake still, and still more for yours. I saw where the real happiness lay in wait for you both, and I drove your image out of my heart, and stamped down in its grave the temptation to affront you with my rashness. I was a man unfit for woman's society, harsh and abrupt at my best. I had lived long alone, and my own will had grown upon me. In a year I should have broken your heart, if by any miracle I could have persuaded you to take my name. I knew what was best for you, and I fought hard with that love which you won from me unconsciously."

"Pray say no more," I urged feebly.

"I won my battle," he continued; "I set you apart from any thought of mine, and I taught myself to believe in that future which I have just tried—very vainly—to sketch forth. But in that belief let me go away still—don't assure me at the last that every chance of your happiness with Mark has passed away for ever."

"It has passed away, and I do not regret it."

"No, no; let me take away one hope—let me

come back to see that hope fulfilled. Try and think of what he was in the old time; and the past love you had for him *must* return. It returns with me for him; and he was dearer to you than he has ever been to me, or you are no true woman."

"You are his brother—I was a stranger to him till we met at Wilthorpe. When he tired of me, I thought my heart was broken; but that was long ago, and I have acted like a true woman in forgetting him."

"Yes. But when——"

"You will say no more," I interrupted. "Richard Stewart, I ask you as a favour to be silent, now."

"I am too much your friend not to obey you," he said; "possess too much knowledge of life not to have that hope of your bright future which you, scarcely knowing yourself, deny so earnestly. God bless you, and good-bye!"

He extended his hand, and I placed mine within it. He shook it long and heartily in his, and then turned back, and left me at last to pursue my purposeless journey. Once I looked behind, and

he was watching me; he waved his cap in the distance, and I fluttered my handkerchief as a farewell signal. So we parted better friends than last night warranted.

But I was troubled—more than ever troubled by his revelation. From the rapid confession of his hopes and fears—those of the past and future, strangely commingled as they had been—loomed one great truth that I had not owned to my heart before that time.

I went out of the high-road to think of it—striking off into a right-of-way through the woodland and parkland of John Kingsworth's large estate. I was glad to feel myself alone there—to be able to sit down under the great-leaved trees, and wonder at the revelation Richard Stewart had made. It had been my fortune—or misfortune, which?—to have aroused his interest in me—that pity from which had evolved, after the old rule, the love akin to it.

And he had outlived it—stamped it down in its grave, were his words! In his estimation of himself he had not considered it possible to be loved, and he had read, he thought, day after day, sure

evidence of a passion for his brother, and that had taught him to say nothing. Going away the secret had escaped him for the first time, and confirmed the suspicions that I would not own, until he had betrayed himself. Then I could look back and remember many slight evidences of an interest which had startled me at times. And looking back, I did not feel so sorry that he had loved me in his day, as I had done in Mr. Crease's case.

I did not pity Richard Stewart; neither did I try to account for that new, inexplicable feeling that brought the tears into my eyes that morning.

CHAPTER VI.

ON THE LEES.

I WAS surprised the next day by a visit from Mr. Mannington, a gentleman whom I had believed was many miles away from me. He came in looking so grave, that I exclaimed at once,

"Has anything happened? Is Bel ill?"

"I am sorry to say she is. Not so ill as to render her confinement to the house necessary, but excitable and nervous, and strange in her ways. Miss Casey, she is wearing me to death!"

"Where is she?"

"She is at Folkestone. We went by easy stages to the Kentish coast. I had intended to cross the Channel with her, and see if change on the Continent would do her good; but she was

taken seriously ill at the hotel, or became seriously opposed to any change; and there she is—at the Pavilion. She will not go forward; she will not come back; she's driving me mad, Miss Casey. It's all the old, variable eccentricities over again."

"She wishes to see me?"

"Yes. I wanted to telegraph to you, but she insisted upon my fetching you; she was not satisfied with any message, and she told me very plainly that I made her nervous. Good God! why, she has made me so nervous watching her that I cannot keep a limb of me still!"

"Her mind is not disturbed, Mr. Mannington?"

"It's not very settled just at present," he replied. "The fact is, Miss Casey, and it is useless to beat about the bush in this matter, she has begun to distrust the genuineness of Mr. Stewart's intentions. She asserts to the contrary, but she could never hide a trouble, and it escapes her at every moment. Best for her that she and Mr. Stewart should meet at once and explain these things. I—I have written to Mr. Stewart, on my own responsibility."

"You have not said anything to wound his pride?"

"I have asserted my own in a quiet gentlemanly manner," he said, confidently, "and have merely asked him for an explanation, or to run over to Folkestone and offer that explanation for himself. I have spoken like a father to him."

"You have done wrong I fear."

"Suspense is worrying my child to death—she is not strong-minded, and the sooner the matter is settled, for better for worse, the sooner will Isabel be composed. Don't you think so, Miss Casey?"

"Mr. Stewart is expected in Wilthorpe in the course of next week."

"Why should we wait a week for Mr. Stewart's pleasure?" said Mr. Mannington.

"Perhaps it is best. I am at your command—when shall we start for Folkestone?"

"My dear Miss Casey, I—I don't think of going back with you. The fact is, I must have rest—I'm completely shattered, body and mind, by Bel's vagaries—I never could stand them—and I have come to you, the one friend of the family in whom I can trust, to beg you as a favour to undertake the guardianship of Isabel until Mr. Stewart has seen her, or you return hither. I always

objected to scenes, and if there's to be one, I would so much rather be out of the way—I would, indeed!"

Mr. Mannington was never cunning enough to hide his selfishness and cowardice—in his flattery of me, he but betrayed his weakness—in his anxiety to shift the care of his daughter into my hands, he betrayed it more. Still I offered no resistance; I was glad of an excuse to be away in search of adventure again; I felt that I might be of service to Isabel in this crisis of her life approaching; I remembered that I had promised Mrs. Kingsworth ever to be at hand, her friend and counsellor, in the emergencies that might arise.

"I will go at once. I will take Emma with me."

"Thank you, Miss Casey. I am for ever indebted to you!"

And Mr. Mannington was really grateful for once in his life.

"You will find," he added, "that she is not alone. I have left her in charge of a very nice family for to-day—she expects you this evening. I am sure she will be as glad to see

your face as she was—my back," he added, drily.

He thanked me again for my willingness to expedite my departure—I have no doubt that he congratulated himself upon his persuasive powers, and gave me little credit for my affection for his daughter. I left him to return to his own home, to the "peace and quietness" he sought there, and went away to Peterborough that very morning, with my faithful *aide-de-camp*.

Before Mr. Mannington bade me adieu, he asked another favour of me; it was a very slight one, and I granted it.

"If, as I hope and trust," he said, "Mr. Stewart really can clear himself of any attempt to win my daughter for her money—I am generous, and do not seek to interfere in this matter, it rests entirely between Bel and him—let me beg of you to telegraph at once to me. I shall be very anxious to know the result, and welcome all three of you at Wilthorpe as soon as possible. You will remember this?"

"I will."

With this promise I went away in search of my ward once more, and on the evening of that day

I stepped, for the first time in my life, on Kentish ground.

Emma Eaves and I found no difficulty in discovering the Pavilion Hotel. One step from the Harbour Station brought it into view, bright with its lights and life that dull grey evening. We passed to the lawn stretching before the hotel, intending a short cut across it to our destination, when a lady, sauntering there with her companion, broke away and ran towards us, calling out my name.

"Oh! I am so glad that you have come—I was afraid that something would stop you—*he* has not come back with you—I am glad of that, too!"

"Don't say that, Bel."

"You and Emma Eaves, two friends at once! why, these are the old days coming back again! And I *am* glad he has not come—I told him if he dared to return, I would run away from him."

"Patience, Bel—where is the patience that you promised?"

"Oh! I am patient; I will tell you presently all that has disturbed me, just a little. Emma, ask somebody to show you Miss Casey's room, and get it ready for her, will you?"

Emma took the hint, and went away at once. Bel was drawing me away from the Pavilion to a second strip of garden-lawn running behind the great hotel, when her companion advanced towards me.

"Miss Casey, I presume?"

I bowed.

"Miss Mannington has been expecting you all day, and becoming somewhat excited lest you should delay your departure from Peterborough. Miss M., you will introduce me to your friend."

"Oh! Miss Casey—Mrs. De Burgh—*there!* Come on, Bertie!"

I did not withdraw at once, and Bel somewhat impatiently released her hand from my arm and walked away.

Mrs. De Burgh took that opportunity to speak her mind with an energy and volubility that I could scarcely follow.

"You will excuse me, Miss Dasey; but if you be a friend of Mr. Mannington's you must allow me to express my feelings—my wounded feelings—on this most remarkable occasion. Mr. Mannington has taken advantage of my presence at this hotel to

place his mad daughter in my charge, without my consent, or without any consideration for me in any manner whatever. I don't know much of Mr. Mannington—I was introduced to him eight years ago, and his memory has been more tenacious than mine. I have been staying here with my daughter for the benefit of my health. I have been recommended by the best physicians perfect abstinence from all excitement; and yet he takes an opportunity of sending into my private room a note that he has been compelled to leave suddenly for some out-of-the-way place or other, and that if I would take charge of his daughter until the arrival of a Miss Basey—Casey—Irish, I presume?—he would esteem it as a considerable favour; and before I could expostulate, or rise from my bed, Mr. Mannington was gone. Mr. Mannington knew well enough that I was a woman of principle, and that my duty would compel me to take charge of the poor child. I have been all my life trying to do my duty in that state of life in which I have been placed by a merciful Providence; and the charge was forced upon me, without my consent, as I said before; for Miss Mannington in less than

five minutes insulted my daughter, who refused to have anything more to say to her, and, besides, was engaged at a picnic party. So I have had the whole responsibility thrust upon me; and Miss Mannington is far from well, and eccentric, and subject to fits of crying, that makes one cry to hear her, which is bad for me—very, very bad! And if you will kindly favour me with Mr. Mannington's address, I will take the liberty, when I am more composed, of writing to that gentleman, and expressing my surprise at his discourteous conduct."

I gave her the address, and she was retiring, when I stopped her.

"This girl you call mad? Madam, you do not mean that?"

"She is eccentric, and terribly obstinate. There is evidently something on her mind, though I have found it impossible to get at it myself. Good evening."

Bel Mannington, who had been walking up and down the lawn, observant of our dialogue, came swiftly to me as Mrs. De Burgh and I parted.

"What has she been saying?"

"Merely expressing a little surprise at your father leaving you in charge to her."

"Well she might," answered Bel; "it *was* a liberty. I know nothing of the woman—I never want to know her or see her again. Why could I not have been left to myself for a few hours, instead of having these strangers thrust upon me? I am best alone."

"You are in trouble, Bel—has anything new transpired since I saw you last?"

"I will tell you. I have been indignant at a few shallow attempts to deceive me. I have resisted that indignity, proffered though it was by my own father. Oh! Bertie, I am very miserable!"

"The old promise once more, Bel. Patience!"

"I have now and then a hope; for my father is too anxious to strengthen my fears, and that renders me suspicious of foul play. Is it not hard to say this of one I am told to love and honour?"

"He may mean well."

It was a trite remark, and failed to re-assure her.

"He would have taken me for a long journey on the Continent, to separate me from Mr. Stewart

—to rouse his anger, perhaps, at my departure without an explanation. That scheme failing—for I would not stir hence—I was very miserable waiting for the truth; my father wrote to Mr. Stewart without my knowledge, and insulted him. I know he did, by the answer which reached us, and which I would read for myself. Mr. Stewart would come to Folkestone at once, and see Mr. Mannington, he said; by letter, he declined on principle all explanation. That letter came last night—last night my father ran away to Wilthorpe, leaving a note for me that he had left me in charge of Mrs. De Burgh, and would send you immediately to take his place."

"At least he keeps his word, Bel."

"He was afraid of meeting the truth."

"He was not well—he had found the task of taking care of you too much for him."

"I have been very quiet. More than once I have remembered that he was my father, and that perhaps I was not loving or dutiful enough for him. Trying to please him, and ever baffled by a manner showing little love for me—trying, Bertie, to be patient, too, and abide by your advice—trying to

believe that my happiness was coming towards me, not fading in the distance—trying and failing in that last belief, and giving way more and more; for I was never strong!"

"We will hope for the best; until the worst faces us, we have time enough to ignore its advance."

"Is that policy?"

"The worst may never come—I am very hopeful, Bertie."

"Hopeful!—the only one hopeful of all who know Mark Stewart!"

I was hopeful *then*. In Mark Stewart seeking Isabel Mannington for anything save love, was beyond my comprehension.

"When will Mr. Stewart arrive?"

"In a day or two," he said; "he wrote to me, also, a line, apprising me of his coming hither—a cold, brief letter enough for him—presaging the future. Never mind, when it is all over, I shall be strong enough to bear it. It is only this uncertainty that worries me!"

Fragile and excitable, I wondered what strength would be left her if the worst she feared should

come upon her then. She had lost confidence in her father already—if, after all, the lover were unfaithful, she would be left with only a weak woman like herself to trust in and to take her part.

"Bertie, if I had never had this money, or if my aunt had lived a few years longer, and seen my marriage-day, my father would have loved me better."

"Pray do not entertain these morbid thoughts concerning him!"

"Here and there, some poor woman is doomed to an unsympathizing father," she said, with a sigh; "I fear it is my lot, though I will be hopeful yet of him. But he is fond of money—before we came to Wilthorpe Hall he was a miser, and my aunt knew that—in my aunt's will he has been bitterly disappointed."

"Through John Kingsworth?"

"Yes. He had built upon the Hall being left to him, or me. The interest of the money that was bequeathed to me is his, if I remain single for three more years."

"Ah! you are not nineteen years of age yet!—

you a girl sorrowing about your future," I said in a lighter tone; "why, Bel, even if there be a disappointment, it will come so early, like my own, that you will be scarcely a woman when the heart is free again!"

"Like your own disappointment!" she said, catching at those words, of which I had already repented. "Yes, you were deceived in him. He was false to you."

I could not confess to her that his brother had made that falsity assume colours less dark to me; I gave my own old version of the story, and I believed in it still.

"He was bewitched by one more fitted for him, Bel. A light-hearted, happy girl, who would have made his home bright after business hours were over."

"Don't speak of that. I know what might have been, and what will be. I am prepared."

"Shall we go in now?"

"Ah! you are tired with your journey, and I am selfish to keep you here. Let us come into my private room. I am more happy and content now that you are here—you, the rival! Poor

Mrs De Burgh!—perhaps I did worry her a little too much to-day. I'll beg her pardon in the morning."

In the morning Mrs. De Burgh had escaped the proposed apology by leaving for Boulogne, with her daughter, by an early boat. In the morning we took our usual places by Bel's side—the old home-places, that made even an hotel look home-like.

Emma Eaves begged to be her maid; and the maid in office was deposed, but kept upon full wages. The deposed one put up with the slight for the sake of the extra liberty, and would have grown confidential with Emma about the "young missuses tantrums," had not Emma snubbed her for her confidence.

Forgetting everything but my desire to assist Bel Mannington, I began the old times with her. I did my best to keep her strong, to chase those thoughts away which, besetting her, could do no good. She showed no excitability with me, but was a staid young woman for her years. All that day we spent in wandering along the Lower Sandgate Road, with the bright smooth sea asleep

in the sunshine on our left. It was another day in which to rejoice and have no fear of evil—all so fair beyond, and yet so treacherous in its fairness.

There were little groups of pleasure-seekers on the beach, a band of music playing, happy children dancing to and fro, all the bright confusion of a watering-place in its season. Bel was too restless to remain with the crowd; we passed them and went on, pausing now and then to rest upon the green cliffs that sloped towards the sea-beach. In the afternoon we were out again. A military band was braying its loudest on our lawn, and all the rank and fashion in Folkestone came in their finest feathers to parade, after the custom of the English —and a pleasant custom, too, if one is full of spirits, and fond of company.

But our spirits were at zero, and the music jarred upon our nerves. We were two women waiting a sentence, so we were glad to escape, and leave lighter hearts to this high holiday.

"I would not have him come and find me in that crowd of people for the world!" said Bel, as she hurried me away.

In the evening we waited for him, but he did not appear. The air was hot and stifling in the house that night, and as the clock struck eight Bel said:

"Let us go out on the cliffs—he will not come till to-morrow now."

When we were toiling up the steep hill leading to the Lees—as the high ground is termed at Folkestone—Bel said:

"He is in no hurry to take pity on my natural suspense!"

"It is a long journey from Edinburgh; he has to travel by two railways."

"If he had good news, with which to make my heart light, he would have been here before this, Bertie."

"You cannot say that. Till he is with you, at your side, do not prejudge him."

It had been my own mistake, I thought—if Richard Stewart were right—and it had left me there, a single woman, to support my friend. Reaching the Lees, we found the very crowd of loiterers whom we had been all day studying to shun. We went through them to the end of the Lees, the grass

worn into ruts and hollows by the feet of fashion there, and strolled a little way along the cliff. The evening was very still, the stars were already out, the night was coming on. Across the still, mirror-like sea, was banked a mass of cloud, which looked ominous for the morrow's fairness. As we stood and gazed at it, the lightning flashed from its depths, and startled us.

"There will be a storm to-night, Bel; you were afraid of lightning when I knew you first."

"I have got over that fear."

The cloud-bank gathered height and width, and deepened in blackness as it spread; the stars became misty and obscure, there was a strange murmur over the broad fields where the corn had been cut, and the harvest gathered in.

"We will get nearer home, at all events, Bel," I suggested.

A return to the Lees proved that the same idea had seized the visitors; people were hurrying away homewards. A few whose houses were adjacent lingered still, and dared the coming storm like us. Bel and I chose the first seat towards the town, and sat watching the lightning, still far away, and

flickering at sea, troubling, perhaps, the fishermen, who had started earlier with their nets.

We were almost left alone, at last; when the thunder-mutterings were audible, and every star had disappeared, the Lees were still enough. Occasionally the footfall of a straggler passed behind us, or a dress rustled by; the sparks of a cigar, blown by the light breeze that had arisen, I can see now, part of that picture, scurrying along in the night, in advance of a man coming up the slope towards us.

"Mark!" said Isabel, suddenly, leaning forwards, and looking down the white chalk road that led from the town.

"I should think not; pray keep still, and if it be he, courage!"

I knew that it was he the next instant, dark and indistinct as his figure was presented to us. I knew it by foreknowledge and went on:

"And if it be Mark Stewart, we will meet him boldly, and bear boldly all our disappointments. Only a man, not a demigod, Bel Mannington!"

Her hand stole through my arm, and it trembled very much upon it. My own heart bled for the

weakness of this child, and feared for her defence —feared for that, at least, in vain! As he came nearer her hand steadied itself wondrously; and turning to glance into her face, I noticed, even through the murkiness of that night, how set it was, and how well its firmness became her. As I looked, the lightning, blue, and more vivid, flashed across it, and showed it almost marble in its new rigidity.

He was unconscious of our waiting there, waiting as if for him. He stood at the summit of the hill, with his hand upon the iron railing, and looked out to sea; then he moved on, and would have passed, had not Bel called him by his Christian name.

He turned, and came towards us at once.

"I have just arrived," he said; "I did not anticipate calling upon you till the morning—I came up here for a little rest and thought, not dreaming that we should meet to-night."

He seemed surprised at my appearance there; but did not allude to it in any way. He took his cigar from his mouth, and tossed it over the cliff, then added,

"I will ask you, Isabel, to allow me to leave any explanation I have to make until the morning?"

"I have waited long for it," she answered; "I am prepared for it; and if you are merciful, you will answer me to-night."

"I am in your hands," he said moodily; "I have not a will of my own in this, if you persist."

I half rose to leave these lovers to themselves, when Bel said hastily,

"No, you must not go. You are my witness, Bertie, and must support my charge."

"I had not expected to be confronted with Miss Casey," he said, in a deeper tone; "but I am not displeased to meet her here. I am here to confess to the whole truth, and a witness for or against me does not matter much."

"Confess!" gasped Bel.

The word was ominous enough, and the lightning which flashed again as she spoke, seemed to wither every hope I had had for her. He sat down by Bel's side, and looked down at the ground, with his gloved hands clasped. I had never seen him with his head bent with shame before; and for an instant I sorrowed for

him more than for Bel. It was a strange humiliation to be sitting there with the two women to whom he had spoken of love, and who had both been won by his professions.

"What do you want to ask of me?" he said.

"Only one or two questions, Mark, that will draw us closer together for all time, or sunder us for ever. You will answer truthfully?"

"I will."

"I have heard lately many things against you —many things that I have tried very hard to disbelieve. I have found out a few truths that require no denial on your part, and that at least speak of a desire to keep me in the dark concerning all that I had a right to know. You were engaged once to Miss Casey?"

"Yes. That you would have known before my marriage, had I not been forestalled in the avowal."

"Whilst that engagement was in force, you met with business losses that brought you to the verge of bankruptcy. You were a poor man—you confessed that to me afterwards—when you asked my aunt for her consent to my engagement with you,

and told me of your love. Mark, was it—oh! WAS it—for my fortune?"

"God forgive me—*yes!*"

She drew herself away from him, and came, shrinking and trembling, closer to me. She folded her hands upon my arms, and held me fast; the whole truth had come to her, and she cared to hear no more. There was no explanation that she wished to listen to after that confession.

"It was a plain question, and I have answered plainly," he said, after a pause. "I have no excuse to offer—in my rashness, my pride, my anxiety to save myself, I offered you my hand. It was a grave fault, and the shame of it recoils upon my head."

"Justly," she moaned.

"I was ashamed, though I would not own it, when the impulse had rendered the act irrevocable," he said; "it was my first step away from truth, and I was troubled. At my brother's house I heard the opinion of an honest, clear-sighted man, and could not brook it. I quarrelled with him, and he has hated me ever since. But there is one extenuating fact to this story—will you hear it?"

The lightning flashed again across our faces, closer and more vividly, and the thunder at last began to warn us of the storm's proximity.

"Let us get home, Bertie, before the storm breaks out," Bel whispered.

Mr. Stewart took her silence towards him for consent, and went on—

"I did my best to keep my faith with you—my honour had been pledged to love you, and there was no effort after the early days in my attempt to prove that you were nearest to my heart of all the world. Bel, I loved you! For your confidence in me, your belief in my sincerity, that trust which under all circumstances you showed for me—above all, for *yourself*, I loved you afterwards—I pledge my honour to it."

Bel Mannington released her hold of me, and sprang to her feet before him. Her bonnet had fallen back on her shoulders, and her dark hair hung about her face. She was at bay now, and ready to denounce him. Had the Lees been swarming with the crowd which the threatening night had dispersed, she would have accused him as readily. She had forgotten time and place, and

she stood there the woman wronged in her affections, juggled out of them by a few fair words, to demonstrate her sense of injury.

"Sir, you have no honour!" she exclaimed; "it is an empty title with you, and I dispute it! I believe in no love like yours; I see the lust for money through it all, flashing like this lightning about us! You sought me out with love for another in your heart, and deceived me! I will have no more falsehood thrust upon my pride—I cancel the engagement—I never wish in all my life to see or hear of you again! Pass from my sight, a coward, who fell in love with my inheritance, and lied and fawned for it, as cowards always do! *You* offer me your love now as reparation; it is but a further insult, and I cast it back, and will have none of it! Let us get home, Bertie."

She went at once away from him, down the slanting road towards the town. I followed her—I felt for her and not for him who had deceived her, dearly as I had loved him once. From the pedestal on which I had placed him in my thoughts he fell, devoid of that rare honour with

which I had endowed him, and believed in.

The lightning struck the idol that night, and cast it in the dust; and in the days advancing I might mourn for what it had been, not for what it then was!

We left him sitting on the bench, with his hands still clasped and his head bent towards the ground; the storm burst over him, and the heavy rain began to fall, and he remained there, baffled and ashamed. He had come with the fair story of his future; and she whom he had professed to love had met him with the past, and shivered like glass every fragile excuse he had desired to offer. He had expected a weak girl, ever swayed by a word, and he had encountered an indignant woman, firm and unforgiving as Nemesis.

In the storm and rain and lightning we went home together, she strong yet; in her room she faced me with that new rigid look of hers.

"Was it just?"

"Yes."

"Were you right, or I?"

"You were right, and I was deceived in him, Bel," I answered.

"And yet I loved him better!" she cried, wringing her hands; "I would have died for him if he had asked me. I knew that he was poor when he came to Mrs. Kingsworth's; and I would not shame him with the thought, even then, of seeking me for money. I trusted in him, and am thus rewarded. Oh! if I could die to-night—if the lightning had struck me dead upon the Lees—at the feet of him I thought so noble and so true!"

She sank forwards then, and I caught her in my arms. The battle was over, the victory had been won, and it was the conqueror whom I pressed to my bosom, and whispered of better days than these!

END OF BOOK THE FIFTH.

BOOK VI.

TRUE COLOURS.

CHAPTER I.

TIME FLIES.

TIME went on at its old rate of progression for all the love troubles in Wilthorpe. Twenty-four hours in every day, and sixty minutes in each hour of sorrow, anxiety or mystery for my little world—joy and content for people more fortunate, spinning round somewhere as a counterpoise, in a bright little world of their own. Presently, by the law of change, it might happen that *our* turn for brightness would arrive. I hoped so; I had faith, and I was not weak of heart, or cast down at the shadows on the path of those I loved. I believed in better times, and waited for them. I spoke of better times to two women, who seemed despondent concerning them—two women set apart from their old lovers, neither one-and-

twenty years of age, looking at life after fashions of their own, and inclined to think no change was ever likely to bring back hope to them again.

Yes, I was of stouter heart, for I could laugh at their morbidity—albeit the laugh was a little affected, at times, and had not the true ring about it. I could tell them my own story, and how I had outlived it, and I could charge at their follies, which piled regret on regret, until their own hearts ached with the burden.

They were two young women hard enough to manage, Bel Mannington and Emma Eaves. They were exceptional young women, and required careful treatment; both had been ill-trained, but, fortunately, the mistrust which I had engendered in both minds against me had long since gone the way of evil things. Two years passed over our heads at Wilthorpe without recording much change in us. Emma Eaves became more like her old, irritable self, as no John Kingsworth crossed her path again. She was discontented with his silence, though she had given him up of her own free will, and turned away from a happiness that had been the dream of her whole life;

she professed contentment, and yet showed discontent; she was strong always in her resolve to keep her promise to the dead, and yet ever anxious to hear of Kingsworth, troubled when he wrote but seldom to me, and answered but evasively my hopes as to his prospects. He had gone abroad at last, and now and then a letter reached us, always from a fresh part of the colony, telling us that he was well, and travelling about a new world, in the hope of finding a place to suit him exactly!

In all his letters he mentioned Emma Eaves, and made inquiry concerning her—was she well too?—was she married yet? In all his letters he called me his dear sister, and signed himself my brother. The tie of kindred that had been dissolved between us did not weaken the affection we had had as boy and girl together.

"If he should come back some day, and marry *you*," said Emma Eaves, "I would not mind so much. But I should be very sorry to hear that he had taken a wife abroad."

"I would not marry John Kingsworth for the world, Em."

"Ah! you say so now!"

Emma Eaves could not understand any woman not loving John Kingsworth well enough to share her life with him. The hero of her love-story was the only man who had kept his colours bright from beginning to end. Bel and I had given up hero-worship, but this girl, with her wild, earnest, faulty love, held firmly to first convictions!

And Bel Mannington? Well, Bel had borne her disappointment better than I had anticipated; she had given way utterly for a few weeks, had fallen seriously ill, and been nursed by me after her return to Wilthorpe, and then she had sobered wondrously. It was an unnatural soberness, for her nature was against it; it was a staidness that rendered me nervous—a want of power to take interest in passing events, which, in one so young, seemed ominous.

All the variability of her first nature—the light step, the quick repartee, the pleasant aggravating sauciness, the little fits of petulance, and the great fits of passion—generally in resentment of a wrong to others—the self-will which resisted authority, and bore down opposition, all were gone! She was a

grave and thoughtful woman at twenty years of age, and when her gravity or her reveries were disturbed, she repaid most intruders on her thoughts by a cool, almost mocking satire, that painfully reminded me of the old lady resting in her grave, oblivious to all the changes since her time.

Bel seemed to imitate the worst traits of her aunt's character; that studied effort to take no interest in outward things, and be ever unimpressed by them, was the old habit of the mistress of the Hall. Would she age like that poor, disappointed woman?—was it a phase of family weakness, developing itself anew in this young life, and calculated to do irreparable harm to it? I would not have it; I would struggle against it with all my power, and make her life a different one! It was my duty still to one who had had great faith in me, and it should not work evil with Bel Mannington for want of weapons to attack it.

Bel had felt a terrible disappointment, and it had changed her. She bore up well, certainly, but I would have preferred her more weak and variable —more like her old self before she fell in love with

Mr. Stewart. I should have been able to judge her correctly then; now she puzzled me.

She professed to have got over her disappointment—even to be prepared for any truer, better lover who might take her for herself; she spoke of that old self as though she had returned to it, and it was only my delusion, which looked at her through a distorting medium, and made troubles out of nothing. But she was grateful for my interest in her—only with me would she soften, and show now and then a glimpse of the affection that she had for me; we were stanch friends, and I went two or three times a week with excuses for dragging her into the sunshine, for taking her on a shopping excursion to Woundell, or for a walk over the fields, or a stroll through Wilthorpe Park.

Whether Mr. Mannington cared for my frequent visits or not, I did not attempt to study. I was a young lady of private property, with time on my hands, and a will of my own. He never made me unwelcome, at least; and I have an idea that he was glad to be free of his daughter's gloomy presence. I cannot say; for he had become gloomy himself, and had long since given up any effort to

render himself companionable. It was a dull house upon which I intruded now—with Mr. Manning-ton in one part of it, and Bel in another. He sought change himself, when too much oppressed with the horrors; but he offered no change to his daughter. A more wretched specimen of a father, I never hope to meet again in life. He wandered about the house like an evil spirit, gloomy and distraught; his nerves had given way more with advancing years, and there was a tremulous motion of his hands like incipient palsy, which it offended him to notice.

Here was another descendant of a family that had always been odd in its way, and invariably unsettled and unhappy. Like his sister, he had made an unhappy match; in many hopes of his life, like his sister still, he had been disappointed. He had loved money for itself, and sacrificed his comforts for the chance of a fortune that had failed him at the last; he had bent his own will to his sister's, and cringed before it like a slave, only to awaken a scorn of him in lieu of gratitude; he had striven very hard, and schemed hard in various ways of life; he had little heart, and less

sympathy; but he had been burdened with unmanageable nerves, that rendered petty things of moment to him, and wore him rapidly away. He was becoming a very old man, in outward appearance, when it was summer again, and two years had drifted by since he had sent me on special service into Kent.

In that summer, for the first time, one afternoon in July, Bel Mannington's apathy was suddenly disturbed. I was glad to see the change, and took hope in better times from it. Surely those times would come?—not always, as if by some stern rule, to which no exception was allowed, apart from her and me.

We were sitting at the open French window of her house—the garden lay beyond us—and Mr. Mannington, with his hands in his pockets, was walking up and down the path, light and agile enough still. His slight figure constantly passing and re-passing the window fidgeted me, and reminded me of a wild beast's restlessness. Bel was listlessly turning over the pages of the county paper, searching for an interesting paragraph—a

pile of fancy-work in which she had tried to help me was lying neglected at her feet.

Suddenly her voice, sharp and quick as the voice of the old times, arrested my attention.

"Bertie, your brother has made up his mind at last. The Hall is to be sold by order of the proprietor."

She passed the paper across to me, and I read the announcement in large type—an advertisement of great length, expatiating on the advantages to be derived from the possession of so desirable a mansion and estate. I was glad to see it; the house looked very dull and lonely from the high road, and depressed the village now. There was little life at Wilthorpe, and trade was worse now no great folk were living there. Mrs. Kingsworth, who had loved the Hall, would have sorrowed to see its slow decay.

"Bertie, I must have that place!" she said.

"Have the Hall!"

"Yes; by any means in my power. It is the old home; and though I hated it once, when I was a foolish girl, anxious to see the world, I feel now that I should like to live in it again."

It was a satisfaction to see her interested in any idea; but the possession of a mansion like that, for a lonely woman, did not appear to me a valuable acquisition, or the most reasonable of thoughts to suggest itself.

Mr. Mannington was arrested in his perambulations by his daughter's voice. He came in looking quite scared at her appeal to him.

"What is it?—what is it?—nothing happened?"

"No. Sit down, please—here's news for you!"

"Not bad news, I hope?"

"No."

He sat down in a capacious arm-chair by the window, and crossed his hands together round his knees, taking a firm hold to keep the signs of palsy down.

"The Hall is to be sold."

"I know it—it's in the papers, Isabel."

"We will buy this place," she said, speaking very clearly and decisively; "it is our natural home, and I am not happy out of it."

"Why, it will fetch fifty thousand pounds!"

"I am twenty-one in a few months—three-fourths of the amount may remain on mortgage, I read—I

can afford the first instalment. If I attend the sale, I must have that place! Why did not Mr. Kingsworth offer it to us?" she said, with the first exhibition of her old petulance and inconsistency.

"He did not think we could afford it, or would be ever mad enough to think of an ugly place like that. I always hated it, and I have no money to spare to help you towards completing the purchase."

"The estate is a productive one—I shall be very careful—I shall save! Pa, you will attend this sale for me? The money is no use in my hands—I will spend it."

"We—we'll talk of this to-morrow. Lord have mercy on us, you don' mean to decide in a minute upon sinking all your money! How will you keep up the place, the servants, and all that? I—I wouldn't have the responsibility of that house on my shoulders, at my time of life, for double its value. I don't think that I should ever like to go back there. She died there, you know, and it's an unpleasant recollection."

"I have made up my mind!"

"It should have been yours or mine without

purchase—she almost promised us that it should," grumbled Mr. Mannington; "we were not treated well."

"She should have disinherited her only son to please you and me, who did so much to embitter her whole life!"

"I did nothing, Bel."

"We might have made her more happy, if we had tried a little. Oh! what could I have done, if I had tried, in lieu of being wicked and ungrateful!"

"She thought everybody ungrateful—I did not see it myself," said her father.

"Think about this sale—and that I have made up my mind to try all in my power to become the purchaser."

"You—you can do what you like with your own money—but it's very foolish. It's as mad an action as any of our family ever thought of—throat-cutting and all. But I'll consider it."

He went into the garden again to think of it; incidents out of the common track affected him, and he was more palsy-stricken from that time. He had never been strong-minded to oppose a

firm will—he would wind round it, and plot against it, but he never had had the courage to defy it, and in this instance he deferred the topic. There was a month to ensue before the sale, and in that month many things might happen—the owner change his mind, his daughter go mad in earnest, or fifty other less probable events. But the time went by, and Bel wavered not. In this purchase of the Hall a new interest was awakened, and she came often to my house to relate her plans, and to take me with her up the avenue and into the rooms of the place, from which no custodian ever warned us. Bel was of the old family, and seemed to have a right there; I was related, or they thought that I was related, to the new owner in some way, and had a right there also. We were free to wander to and fro about the deserted rooms, unwatched by housekeeper or steward. It seemed home already!

"When I get it, Bertie," she said, "I shall ask you to let Meadow House, and settle here with me. I will constitute Em my maid again, if she be not too proud for the office; and here, as if nothing had happened, will come back a great

deal of the old life. As I grow older, I should like to become more like my aunt, the proud and grave gentlewoman who ruled this house with dignity!"

"And was unhappy, Bel," I said; "that is a dark thought to settle down with. You have been studying your aunt's character—I know it now!"

"I am a Mannington!"

"Bel, I would give up the thought of purchasing this place," I urged; "you must not settle down here—you so young still. It shadowed your early days—it will oppress your later ones. You will find peace elsewhere—never in this grand and lonely home."

"I have made up my mind—you can hold aloof from me, and make it lonely if you will."

"Always with you whilst you will have me, Bel!"

"That's right," she said. "Why, you are the Dame Goodbody that I used to call you!"

She turned to smile at me, and pleased to see that smile light up her face once more, I clasped her in my arms to kiss her for it.

It was getting brighter, after all, I thought. That ideal scene I called my landscape did not seem so far away from that day.

CHAPTER II.

A SLIGHT ECCENTRICITY.

AS the days passed on, and the time of the sale approached, Bel Mannington's decision underwent no change. She was anxious to purchase that house and estate for a sum far in excess of her own fortune; content to saddle herself with a heavy mortgage, the interest of which would be a large sum in itself to pay; satisfied with the chance of obtaining a good agent—as if there were hundreds of Richard Stewarts wanting employment about Wilthorpe—not daunted by the dismal picture which her father drew of the mortgagee foreclosing, demanding the rest of the money, selling up the estate at last, and ruining perhaps her and him.

She must have the Hall; she did not believe that

Mr. Kingsworth or his solicitors would ever be hard upon her; she had faith in making the property pay; it was her aunt's house, and Mrs. Kingsworth had never anticipated it going out of the family.

On the day before the sale I received a visit from Mr. Mannington. A private and confidential visit he requested, therefore Em was excluded from my sitting-room; whilst Mr. Mannington sat in a chair facing me, and frightened me with his grimaces, and his shaking hands and knees.

"Miss Casey, I have come to ask you to use your very utmost exertions to-night to turn Bel's mind from this idea. She's really mad—madness is in our family—my mother cut her throat with a razor, and Mrs. Kingsworth was no saner—not a bit. Miss Casey, you have been so long a friend of the family, that I am sure she'll listen to you."

"I am afraid that you value my persuasive powers at too high a rate, sir."

"N—no, I think not," said he in reply; "she'll always listen to you, you know. You've got round her somehow—it's a knack you have.

It really is a preposterous idea, now, is'nt it?"

"It has done her good, at least. Since the adoption of it, she has been a different woman."

"Oh! yes—certainly different; but it's a question as to whether it's a change for the better—I don't think so."

"Indeed!"

"It can't be a better change that sets her mind on this ridiculous scheme. In the first place, it's a whim, and she will repent it. It's a place beyond her means, in the second. And in the third, it's ungrateful of her—I consider it ungrateful of her, after all that I have done."

"I cannot see exactly where the ingratitude lies."

"Mrs. Kingsworth left Bel's money in trust to me—not to the sole executor, Richard Stewart. That was singular, and showed her confidence in me. I have been living on the interest of that money, one thousand and fifty pounds per annum, and it's a great deal to give up. She's not of age for some months yet, and I have no right to give it up—though I will, of course, if she insists upon it."

"And the ingratitude on her part?" I inquired again.

"Is in this. While she remains unmarried, or has no valid reason for expending it, she—she might leave it in my hands to manage for her. I'm not a rich man myself, and it's a large income to give up; for many years I have been at the expense of her board and education, pocket-money, and all manner of things—and it *is* hard!"

"Have you reasoned with her?"

"She's perfectly unreasonable; she always has been an undutiful daughter," he whimpered; "and I can't stand argument. I'm old and shattered—going to pieces fast. I can't live very long, and she might leave me and the money in peace for the little while that I have to live."

He looked going to pieces whilst he sat there; his chest fell in, his neck was craned forward in a singular manner, and his whole frame shook with nervous agitation. He fought hard for the use of the money a few months longer; he clung to the hope of holding fast to it with a tenacity worthy of his stronger and more money-getting days.

"I will tell her what you have said, if you wish it, Mr. Mannington."

"Thank you. How kind you have always been to me and mine!"

"I will tell her the more readily, because I think that this scheme has not been sufficiently considered, and that this large estate, in the hands of a young girl, and encumbered as it will be by a heavy mortgage, may be a source of trouble to her."

"Ah! you see it in my own light. If Bel had only been born as sensible as you, Miss Casey!"

I shivered at the compliment, through the transparency of which I fancied I could read the exultant satisfaction of the gentleman addressing me.

"But you must not build upon my success with her. She is set upon this scheme, and I am sure it is beyond my power to turn her from it."

He hoped not; he prayed not; I must not be too despondent, and mar my persuasions that way. He shook more than ever after my last assertion; I could see his small eyes looking dreamily over my head, as at an apparition there

which haunted him. He gave me a hundred directions as to my best course to pursue, and listening, or affecting to listen, to them, I could almost imagine myself a conspirator plotting against Bel's happiness in my turn.

In the evening I went in search of Isabel Mannington; in the evening, for her own sake, and not in the least for her father's, I endeavoured to depicture the trouble that the establishment would bring her; and I repeated the objections which her father had urged that afternoon.

Bel listened very patiently, then replied,

"I have told you my reasons, Bertie, for obtaining possession of that house. I have made up my mind—I should like trouble with it, when I am in possession—trouble will keep me from stagnating!"

Mr. Mannington came in, and looked askance at his daughter from beneath his shaggy grey eyebrows.

She faced him at once with her resolve.

"Miss Casey has been telling me of your objections, pa," she said; "they are but light ones, and half of them imaginative. I think we shall

be more at home in the old Hall—that we *shall* be happy there! It will be like going back to the old life and beginning afresh. You must not try to damp my pleasure by drawing a gloomy picture of my responsibility. I am looking forward to that responsibility with no small satisfaction. Work for my hands, and my brain; and the thoughts which have almost desolated me, dying away in the stirring action of making the estate pay. I shall be quite a business woman, like Aunt Kingsworth, presently!"

The thoughts which had desolated her! For the first time there was the acknowledgment of the grief from which she suffered still; an incentive to turn her thoughts away from one distracting subject for contemplation was sought for now, not shunned. She would be the old Bel Mannington in heart again, and something better than the old Bel Mannington in her riper, steadier womanhood. The Hall might not be the worst investment for her money and time, after all. I had been wrong before in my conclusion as to what was best—I might be so in this.

Mr. Mannington accepted his daughter's resolve

as final. He had only suggested the expediency of further consideration of the subject; he would not say another word concerning it; he would attend the sale to-morrow, and bid for it to the last farthing of his daughter's money—to stand as a quarter of the amount paid down for the estate.

It would not require so large a sum as Bel's inheritance to represent that amount; but if there were a competitor "sweet upon the property—an honest competitor," he added with a sigh, "there would be ducks and drakes made of all the cash!"

"You will accompany me to Woundell to-morrow," said Bel; "we will have an afternoon's shopping, and be the first to hear the news when father comes from the 'Black Bear.' I don't see why you and I, Bertie, should not invade the 'Black Bear's' den, and watch the bidding for ourselves."

"Ladies never do such a thing," said Mr. Mannington; "it's quite indelicate. Why, gentlemen and gentlemen's agents will fill the room; and they'll be given sherry and port before the sale begins—it's country fashion—and then they will get stupid, and make stupid remarks. I wouldn't have you there at any cost."

"Well, I may trust you," said Isabel, almost doubtfully; "you must not come to me and say the bidding was too high. I shall know the price in the *Woundell Herald* on Saturday."

"I'll do anything you wish—I have said so. It's *your* money that you are going to fool away, not mine!"

He darted from the subject—presently, from the room, to begin his garden perambulations before the night set in too deeply. We sat in the shadows, "between the lights," and talked of the future. How we planned that future out, and mapped our places therein! I accepted office again as "companion;" there was real pleasure for me to think of going back to the Hall, for I had always loved it. Every turn of the park lane, every dell and glade and bosky thicket were familiar to me—and to any of the great rooms of the mansion I could have found my way blindfolded. I caught the enthusiasm of the speaker, and forgot her rashness, and my own advice. I was a business woman, quick at figures, and could help her to sift business complications with the agent—"if we could but find out Richard Stewart!" said Bel—

I was to have my own room again, looking over the front sweep of the lawn, where the deer were fond of basking when the house was quiet, and hurrying down the dip of land into the park when carriages came up the avenue.

The night stole on us before we were aware that the lights had not been rung for, and Mr. Mannington had not come in from the garden. Bel, good friends with her father and every one, went out with me in search of him, and found him screwed in a corner of the summer-house, with his fingers to his mouth.

He jumped up at perceiving our approach, and thought he must have fallen asleep there—what time was it? Did anybody want him? He returned with us to the parlour and proposed a hand at whist; he would take dummy, "open dummy," against his daughter and me, and we should play for sixpence a corner.

It was so seldom that he was inclined to be companionable, that we fell in with his views, and commenced the game, with the great oil lamp lighted, the French windows open, and only the muslin curtains drawn, through which filtered the

light summer breeze astir that night. Mr. Mannington was an excellent whist-player—whist was his *forte*—and he was at his best that night. His hands shook a little more with the excitement of the game, and once he dropped his cards face uppermost upon the table, and cursed his own stupidity; but, these minor affairs excepted, he played well, and won our sixpences quite easily.

He was the quick-witted agreeable host and father that night—one could judge how pleasant he might have made his own existence, as well as those with whom he had lived, had he been always like that. Perhaps the thought suggested itself to him, for when the last game was over, he looked at Bel Mannington, and sighed heavily.

I went away that night with a better opinion of him—perhaps he was not so selfish and irritable a man; perhaps he had never set the story going of the stolen money, and damaged the good name of John Kingsworth.

He and his daughter called for me the next day in the pony-chaise; he was in the same excellent spirits, suave and agreeable. He reminded me of the day when he drove Emma Eaves and me from

Peterborough to Wilthorpe. He spoke of the game at whist that we had had last night, and of his easy victory. He would give us our revenge when we got back again—he should not have too many sixpences to spare after all that money had been sunk on Mr. Kingsworth's estate, and he must earn them when he could!

He was attentive to me, and afraid that I was too lightly clad; it might be dark before the sale was over—there were other sales before the one that interested us—and the nights were chilly yet for sitting in an open chaise. He had brought a great-coat himself, and a woollen comforter—he had learned to be very careful of himself now that he was going to pieces.

It was the second time he had used that phrase since yesterday, and he laughed at it as at a good joke. I remembered the time when any allusion to his state of health excited and irritated him.

We drove into Woundell, and went at once to the "Black Bear," a large hotel that, before the railway days, had done a rare profitable trade in post-horses, and was thriving yet. A respectable

hotel, patronized by the gentry—the head-quarters where all great sales by auction came off—a place where public dinners were given in election times, and committees sat on county matters—where the judges put up when they were out in assize times on hanging business.

Round the doors were many old faces—Sir Benjamin Prout's for one. Here were the county magnates at whose dinner-tables we had sat, and whose soirées we had attended in times when our hearts were lighter. Since Mrs. Kingsworth's death I had received only invitations from Mr. Gapwing, and Bel had let her father go alone to all the feasts. Her story had become known, too, and been extensively circulated; Mr. Stewart and she had had a desperate quarrel, and she was dying of a broken heart—"Poor, silly child, what could she expect with that dark face of hers?" it was whispered was the Honourable Miss Gudgeon's comment upon these facts.

Sir Benjamin Prout came up to the chaise and shook hands with each of us.

"You are better, I am glad to see," he said to Bel.

"I have not been ill, Sir Benjamin," was the quick reply.

"Oh! I beg pardon," he said colouring; then turning to Mr. Mannington, said,

"You haven't set your heart on having the old place back again, I hope?"

"I should think not," Mr. Mannington replied, winking at us to keep silence; "do you intend making a bid for the Hall?"

"No—I am after Christopher's farm. I would not have the Hall at a gift, without Richard Stewart as manager."

"Whose likely to bid for it?"

"Very few, I think. We're all afraid of it. It'll go for a song."

"I should not be surprised."

Mr. Mannington assisted us to alight, and looked at his watch. A groom of the "Black Bear" led the horse round to the stable.

"Twelve o'clock, and the sale is not till one," Mr. Mannington said; "whatever will you do all the time of the sale?"

"Divide our time equally between the linen-draper's and the pastrycook's," said Bel, saucily.

She was in high spirits that day. The old times *were* coming back!

"Where shall I meet you—say at four?"

"At Huxley's."

"And at five?"

"At Brill's."

"From five wait there till I come. Miss Casey, you'll lose your brooch—allow me—I'm an old man, and the attention don't look peculiar."

Before I could object, or smile at his new pleasantry, or be surprised at his attention, a little miniature brooch—Bel's present to me with her likeness in it—was in his hand.

"The pin's loose—I'd better take care of it till we get back again," he said; "which way are you going?"

"Townwards."

"I have an hour to spare—I'll see you into the town," he said, and offered each an arm.

He escorted us politely into the linendrapers, and then left us, with a jest to the proprietor in attendance not to tempt us with too expensive articles. Half-an-hour afterwards, he made me hold my breath a moment, to find him looking at

us through the swing glass-door of the shop. When he saw me he disappeared; but it was a strange action on the part of Mr. Mannington, and set me wondering at his eccentricity.

We made our purchases, and strolled through the busy little town; noted its architectural adornments before alluded to in this history; wandered about the principal streets, and turned away, both with a shudder, from the reminiscences which a sudden proximity to the town-hall conjured up.

For an instant it was winter time, and the snow was thick in Woundell streets. The lights were brilliant in the upstairs windows, and the guests were dancing in the ball-room once more. Once again there rang in my ears the mad galop music which had played its accompaniment to the waking from my love-dream. I was glad to dash away from my reverie, and seek to arouse Bel Mannington from hers.

We spent the afternoon shopping after that. Bel seemed inclined to waste her money that day; she would have made her first investment on behalf of the household properties of the Hall,

had I not suggested that a disappointment might ensue, and some capitalist, at any price, outbid her father's modest offers.

At four we were at Huxley's, the linendrapers, awaiting Mr. Mannington, who came not. At five o'clock we were ensconced at Brill's, the pastry-cooks, sipping our coffee, and expecting good news every instant. At half-past five, Bel looked anxiously at the clock in the private room where we were sitting, and said,

"What a late sale, Bertie!"

At six she rose and said,

"I can't remain in suspense here. Let us leave word for Mr. Mannington to wait till we return. I am anxious to know the result, and the 'Black Bear' will not eat us up, Bertie."

We sallied forth into the street again. The sun was going down behind the market-place, and rendering the top windows on the opposite side of the way aflare with flame; the workmen who lodged at Woundell were coming home; some early tradesmen, wholesale and independent, were putting up the shutters.

Before the "Black Bear" we found a crowd of

equipages still; knots of coachmen and groups discussing their master's business; a Woundell policeman with white Berlin gloves and a cane; several dogs, who had turned out to see a coach-dog—ill-tempered and aristocratic—and insult him; and no end of boys. There were stir and bustle before the "Black Bear;" but gentlemen were thinning in the hotel; to all appearances the sale was over, and the attendants thereat were only lingering for a few more words, or a few more glasses.

Sir Benjamin Prout was coming down the two broad steps when Bel broke from my arm, and ran towards him.

"Miss Mannington!" he said, in some surprise.

"The sale is over?"

"Oh! yes—this hour and a half."

"Are we successful—have we got the Hall, Sir Benjamin?"

"You did not bid for it, that I am aware. Your father was not present. It went for an old song, as I thought it would."

"My father—not there!"

"He has not been all day."

"Treachery, Bertie! I ought not to have

trusted him. I knew that I was wrong," she said; "I will never forgive him!"

She was hurrying away, when a new thought suggested itself.

"Who has bought the Hall?"

"Oh! you haven't heard? Why, *Richard Stewart!*"

CHAPTER III.

THE LAST APPEAL.

THE reader who has before this divined the grim truth awaiting us—readers who are so quick now-a-days, and *not* to be entrapped—must make due allowance for our dulness. We had not yet seen all the truth; every minute brought it nearer to us, but till we were face to face with it, we could not believe the very worst.

The worst came in due course, and I need not follow our progress to it step by step. Mr. Mannington had decamped with the trust money—and with his own money, if he had ever possessed any—and left his daughter alone in the world. He had shown one bit of sentiment at the last, by taking away her portrait from me; at home we found one evidence of a little thought for her he had abandoned,

in five one hundred pound notes spread out on her desk. He had even begun a letter to her, which his trembling hand had not been able to finish. We could make out, from the almost illegible scrawl, that he was sorry; that he was compelled to go; that he had been injured by his sister—always that old grievance with him!—and that he could not account for all the money left in trust, and so had taken the rest to make matters more clearly comprehensible!

Bel was afflicted by her father's abandonment; the loss of the money she did not appear to regret, even though the Hall, by a process not explainable yet, had become the property of Richard Stewart. She felt alone then, despite my friendship; she suffered from the thought that not one of her kith and kin remained; she did not accuse that poor selfish father of hers, but sorrowed for him, and reproached herself for having set him the first example of ingratitude and duplicity.

The ill-news flew apace through this acoustic country, where sound of evil doings travelled with wonderful rapidity. Mr. Mannington's name was

registered on the list of black sheep, and the virtuous community, and that portion of the community that had not been found out, cast up their eyes to heaven, and sighed forth—"Who would have thought it!"

Bel Mannington relapsed into her old staid manner after her disappointment and her father's treachery; drew herself into that objectionable moodiness against which I had already protested.

"*When* you betray me, Bertie, I shall have lost faith in everybody in the world!" she said, one day.

"Do you think I shall?"

"I hope not—you were not frank and open with me concerning that engagement," she said, doubtfully.

"It was *his* wish, Bel—and my fault. But will you taunt me with that past wherein we both have suffered?"

"Forgive me—no," she said, casting her arms round me, "I am only unsettled, and not like myself. You will lose faith in me, not I in you—for I am a wicked woman, undeserving of your love!"

"Let me dismiss the subject, and propose

another. When will you come and live with me in my house?"

"Never!"

"You must not live alone in this one any longer. It is altering and aging you. I am your guardian, bound by a promise to your aunt, paid by your aunt five thousand pounds to watch you, whilst you are single in the world—above all, compelled, by my liking for your refractory self, to take you home with me!"

"I shall go forth into the world," she answered, sadly, "try to earn my own living as companion, governess, maid-of-all-work—anything!"

"Not whilst I am alive!"

She smiled faintly at my warmth; taking the smile as a fair sign of a milder mood, I did my best to persuade her that day to keep "house and home" with me. I spoke of my own loneliness—of the comfort we might be to each other—of my wondrous humility, which would have shared her grand home at the Hall for her sake, and her unreasonable pride, that would not share Meadow House for mine.

She was not a firm woman in all things, and the

loneliness of her home had oppressed her more than she had imagined—she wavered, and finally gave way. She would stay with me, and share house-keeping expenses with me until her five hundred pounds were gone—*then* she would go forth into the world. I was compelled to agree to these conditions, trusting to my own ability to think of something new when the time came to talk of change.

So she settled down in Meadow House with Em and me. We were three women who had been crossed in love! We three seemed to settle down "for good and all!" What new incident from the misty beyond was to step forth and separate us now? We were not likely to find any fresh lovers, or to wish for them; we should grow formal, old-fashioned, and grey-haired in time; and the little boys of Wilthorpe would point us out as the three old maids, who lived together at the house with the green verandah, and kept "themselves to themselves" so much!

And whilst I was drawing this fancy-picture, the elements of change were brewing round us.

It was a month after the sale, and Mr. Richard

Stewart had not appeared to claim the estate yet. Mr. Stewart, it was rumoured, was expected every day; the bargain had been concluded, and people on the estate waited the good pleasure of the *ci-devant* bailiff.

One morning Emma Eaves and I were gardening in the front of our house, training, clipping, and regulating those plants inclined to grow luxuriant and straggling towards the autumn months—on the same principle that we human plants grow garrulous and prosy as we verge towards *our* autumn—whilst Bel Mannington sat at the open window, affecting to watch the proceedings, and becoming full of dreamy thought, as was her wont in those sunshineless latter days.

We were busily gardening, then, when some one approached our oaken fence, stopped, and attentively watched our proceedings.

Looking up, expecting to see Mr. Crease, or a friendly face from Wilthorpe, I saw a long-bearded, huge-whiskered being, indifferently attired, studying our movements. A tramp on his way, undoubtedly; and a very rude tramp, also, who, unabashed by finding himself detected, continued to

stare down upon us, with his hands in his pockets, and a felt hat cocked over his eye-brows.

Emma Eaves, a shrewder observer than I, looked up in her turn, somewhat indignant at this persistent shadow thrown across the garden-beds, and gave a scream of recognition.

"John!"

"Well, I thought you might have known me before," he said, unlatching the wicket, and coming forwards to greet us; "two years ought not to change a fellow so abominably!"

Two years had changed him very much now—changed him in outward appearance for the worst, my sinking heart assured me. He was more like the brother of old time, who had been devoid of every sober thought, and let the tide of circumstance drift him where it willed. It was a reflex of the man of the Corkcutters' Hall days—indifferent to present and future, and heedless of past warnings; his very slouching step assured me of it as he advanced towards us. After all this time, all the old efforts, all the improvement that had come to him and made him a better man, this moral and deplorable decadence!

"Oh! John," I murmured as he advanced, "you have very bad news to tell me—you are not the man with whom I parted last here—the man of whom I have had such hopes!"

"Don't look so frightened, Bertie," he said; "I'm all right enough. I haven't spent all my money, and there's the world before me. Well, Em, *you* will not turn your face away from me, because I have come a few thousand miles to say 'Good morning?'"

"I am very glad to see you, John," she said, letting him take both her hands in his and shake them—one with a garden trowel in it.

"And I am very glad, too, John," I said, greeting him in turn; "in your good or ill estate, I shall never turn away from *you*."

"Who's that at the window there?"

"Miss Mannington."

"Ah! no friend of mine; therefore I'll stay here in the garden, and give you a true and particular account of my adventures before my flying visit here is ended. I have only three hours to stay."

"Three hours! Come into the house, then, and——"

"No—I'll stay here. I was up late last night at a card-party, and the fresh air is more pleasant. I walked from Peterborough this morning, but I have not got rid of the head-ache yet. But I'm all right, Bertie—steady enough in my way, and trustworthy still, for all that robbery of the money —you remember?" he added, with a short, husky laugh, that was intended to convey an ironical significance.

He leaned his back against the garden fence, set one thick, crab-shell pattern boot upon my Tom Thumbs, and proceeded to afford us a glimpse of his late life. I sat on a garden-stool with my weed-basket at my feet, looking up at him; Emma kneeling on the turf, affected to be still busy with her trowel, loosening the mould round a favourite rose-tree.

"I have not a great deal of news for you," he said; "I have been knocking about the world, looking for a good investment in a country less worn to death than this one. I have been to Australia, speculating in a few things that have

not made my fortune; and I have lost money, as people must lose money, before the trump card turns up."

"What reason had you for speculating, John?" I asked.

"I wanted a little excitement—I am not the man to sit down in a new or old country, and do nothing. And to sit down all alone, too, with no one to care for me, is the hardest work I know."

"You have sold the Hall?"

"Yes; I owed a great deal of money, and was obliged to sell, Bertie. The Hall was no good to me. Have you heard who is the purchaser?"

"Richard Stewart."

"Exactly. These Stewarts come of a lucky race—misfortunes are surmounted, and the tide is seized at the turn, and away they go to fortune. Richard Stewart went to Australia also, and found the prizes which never came within sight of me. Everything he touched he turned to gold at once in Midas fashion."

"He has returned?"

"Yes; he came back in the same ship with me."

"And your next step in life, Kingsworth?"

"Oh! don't ask me," he said carelessly; "I shall return to Australia, for I have still faith in the place—and here I am under suspicion. But I do not believe that I shall be thoroughly happy until all the money is spent, and I am plain, penniless John Kingsworth once again."

"You must not talk like this—this is going back to the old life of my City days. You don't wish that?" I cried.

"I was happy after a fashion then."

"Why not seek a clerkship——"

"I'm too great a man at present. Clerks with private fortunes are always a nuisance to their employers."

"Why not start in business for yourself—in Edinburgh—Glasgow? Only a little while ago you said——"

"Only a little while ago," he interrupted. "Ah! there's the reason why I should not start. Only a little while ago I was in training under Mr. Stewart of Edinburgh, and learning to be a steady business man; then my mother's money fell to my share, and has been more a curse than a blessing, as I thought

it would, if there were any retributive justice this side of eternity."

"This is the old improvident brother, who cared for nothing, and took false views of life and its duties."

"Don't lecture me, Bertie," he said; "I can't help it. I have tried hard enough. But I never did care for money much, and there's nobody to care much for me—yourself excepted."

Emma Eaves dropped her trowel, picked it up again, and worked away with renewed vigour.

He glanced towards Emma, then said—

"I come back here for my last chance—to make my last appeal. I'm miserable in mind, unsettled, and want some one to take care of me. There's the rock ahead in the future—no one to take care of me! You can't, Bertie, now the sister drops into the friend; and you will not, Emma, because a promise to my mother has cancelled an old promise made to me. So I drift on alone, with only myself to please!"

"Don't tempt me, John," Emma murmured. "I cannot break that promise to your dying mother. It was her first thought after Miss Casey

had left, and she was not happy in her mind till I had promised her."

"I wonder if she knew the result of that poor promise, whether she would rest quietly in her grave," he said gloomily. "Well, well, I did not come here with any hope of fair results. You were always hard to turn from an idea, Em, and that's the reason why for good and evil you remained my champion so long. I deserted you for your good name's sake, when you were a child; you desert me now, and I must make the best of single blessedness. I daresay it is all for the best; for I should make you a bad husband, and bring you to beggary."

He looked at his watch again, then said,

"That business disposed of, Bertie, I will have a little talk with you; and will now avail myself of your past offer to adjourn within doors."

We went into the house together; as we entered the front sitting-room Miss Mannington rose and almost shrank away from him into a corner. He reddened at her impulse to avoid him; he saw in the act the shadow of that old suspicion of his honesty

lying between himself and polite society at Wilthorpe.

"Good morning, Miss Mannington," he said.

"Good morning, Mr. Kingsworth," she murmured, without looking towards him, as she passed round the room and hastened out of the house to the lawn, where I saw her a few minutes afterwards talking energetically to Emma Eaves.

John Kingsworth proceeded at once to business.

"Before I spend all my money—and there is a spell upon me that urges me to get rid of it, as money that can never do me any good—let me think of the two friends I possess still. In Woundell Bank—whenever you like to draw upon it for a marriage portion, or have any idea of speculating on your own account in any way that seems best for you—you will find to your account six thousand pounds."

"I'll not have it."

"There it will be in your name—you my sister, who tried so hard in the old days to keep me walking soberly through life. I must not forget you, Bertie, whilst the chance lies in my power."

"I am well provided for."

"That subject is dismissed for good," he said, emphatically.

I did not intrude upon it again. The money was better there than in his hands, perhaps —in some future day it might be of service to him.

"There is a like sum for Emma Eaves," he said; "four thousand pounds of it mysteriously contributed as conscience money, and a thousand pounds added thereto. Keep that in trust for her when she marries—keep it a secret from her until then. She was a good friend when she was younger, and I must not forget her, though she turns away from me."

"Only for one reason, John."

"No matter the reason, she turns away. Now these minor matters settled, I am ready to return to Australia, or anywhere else."

"Go to Edinburgh, and see Mr. Mark Stewart, John."

"Ah! he was a good friend, was he not? But he is a rich man now, I hear, and I have no doubt his brother has poisoned his mind against me.

That Richard Stewart has always been my *bête noire!*"

"If you would only ask Mr. Stewart's advice!"

"No. I am past advice now," he said. "I shall go my own way, and see to what end it will lead!"

He and I retraced our steps into the garden. He was going away for ever now; I should never see him again. A man in whom so many good attributes remained still, and yet who had been so easily influenced through life! With a woman to love him and influence him for good, I would not even yet despair of him. But alone with that weak spirit, proceeding his own way, which had ever been the wrong one, unless a stronger mind than his regulated his movements. Poor John!

"I think I'll go now," he said, in a hesitating manner. "I have to meet some Woundell lawyers, and then—then I shall start at once. This part of the country always gives me the horrors!"

He stooped and kissed me, wished me every success in life, tried to laugh away the tears in my eyes, and then crossed to Emma Eaves. Miss Mannington moved away as he approached, and

vexed me not a little by her studied reserve. I felt always inclined to be John Kingsworth's champion.

"Good-bye, Em," said John; "I'm going now for good. I shall never trouble you again after this!"

"Where are you going?"

"To Woundell."

"Presently, I mean—when everything is settled here?"

"Abroad again. I am tired of England."

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Em."

He stooped and kissed her also, as though he had a right, remembering their past relationship. Em did not shrink away from him, but turned very white as his face came close to hers. Bel Mannington stood watching them very intently from the distance.

"She will let him go," Bel said, advancing to me, "and I have told her that my aunt repented at the last of the promise which she had exacted from her. Still he may sink her life as well as his—only hers is a love I cannot exactly understand."

They had parted, Emma Eaves and John Kingsworth; John was at the gate, fidgeting nervously with the lock, and Em was watching him. When the gate was open she gave a little scream and ran towards him, flinging her arms round his neck, and sobbing on his breast, more like the wild girl of the past days than the quiet woman she had lately sobered down to.

"Don't go abroad—unless you take me too!"

So one strange courtship came to an end after the truest and best fashion—if after a fashion somewhat odd. But they were as odd a couple then as they had ever been in the past, and they remained an odd couple all their lives.

"I shall stay three weeks instead of three hours here," John Kingsworth said; "and we'll put up the banns in Wilthorpe Church, and Bertie Casey shall stand the wedding breakfast!"

"With all my heart!"

CHAPTER IV.

JOHN KINGSWORTH'S MARRIAGE.

AFTER the renewal of engagement between Emma Eaves and John Kingsworth, I took upon myself the task of lecturing John, and giving him the best advice in my power. I bade him think of the happiness of the girl who had clung to him through good and evil, who had been ever his champion, and had now resolved to share his life with him. I begged him to remember that he would shortly have a wife to think of, work for, and keep steady for, and that in submerging himself in a sea of trouble, he sank her with him.

"Trust me," he said; and I fancied, even in those early days, I saw on his face the new responsibility adding a gravity and earnestness that belonged to his best time—when he served his ap-

prenticeship to steadiness with Mark Stewart of Edinburgh.

Then like a talkative and officious woman as I was becoming, I lectured Emma Eaves in turn. I told her of the power that she might exercise for good with Kingsworth; and of the harm she might do if her old impulsiveness and excitability carried her too far away from sober thought. Emma had improved wonderfully of late days—she received my lecture with all humility, too, and said upon conclusion,

"I have great faith, Miss Bertha. I only understand him even now, and I am sure that Jack and I—John and I," she corrected, "will be very happy, faithful and content. I wish he had been the poor man I knew once, though—I could have managed him better then. But he has lost a great deal of his money, and he don't look the great gentleman that he was—that's a comfort!"

Emma was in high spirits now *her* love troubles were over. Never was a girl who stood less upon "proprieties," and showed a greater anxiety to be married before anything should happen to prevent it. She was very happy, very proud of John

Kingsworth, and her bright face and cheerful voice had its effect upon two more sober women, and rendered us akin to "the frivolous young things" we had been once.

Still I daresay there were a few grave thoughts in our midst. We were all at work at wedding garments, doing our own dressmaking in an economical spirit; and there passed a sharp reminiscence or two in our midst—just a "stitch" in our memories, not to be alluded to at that time.

The wedding-day came at length; and we walked quietly to Wilthorpe Church, John Kingsworth, in defiance of all rules of etiquette, calling for Emma Eaves at our cottage, and taking her away on his arm, leaving Bel and me to bring up the rear.

For a man of property, as John Kingsworth was still, there never was so humble a wedding *cortége;* the publication of the banns in Wilthorpe Church had led the villagers to expect great doings and high holidays. Mr. Kingsworth, late of the Hall, was a substantial fact, and likely "to do" the thing well. In expectation of a fair spectacle, the villagers had mustered pretty thickly in the church-

yard, and inside the church; and upon our arrival they stared dreamily, and in some instances indignantly at us, as though they had been victims of an imposition, and this was a marriage on false pretences.

Marriages were few in Wilthorpe, and this might have been a cotter's wedding, for all evidence to the contrary. That girl in the sober grey silk, with the plain white bonnet, was the bride. Well, of all the brides the Wilthorpians saw in their lives, this beat them all for quietness! Why, last year the grave-digger's daughter had a blue silk flounced dress, and a green bonnet with primrose ribbons, and looked smarter "by a long chalk"; and the haberdasher's daughter, at the corner shop, who was engaged to young Larkins from London, had declared that she would die at the altar, saying "No," rather than not be married in a veil like the *élite*.

"I hope we have not disappointed these good people in a show," said John to me, when we were in the church; "but there are some old women in the corner looking daggers at us!"

"We are a very quiet wedding-party, certainly."

"Em wanted it quiet, like a sensible woman," he said; "she was always a sensible girl in her way—which is the best of ways. To think of saying 'Yes' to me, at a time when I *seemed* going down-hill again. To prefer the scamp to the gentleman!"

"Was it all acting, then, John Kingsworth?"

"Oh! no. I had lost a great deal of money, and come down two or three steps from my high estate. Not head-first to the bottom of the flight, though. I made the worst of it—will you forgive me?"

"Yes."

"And we'll not say anything to Em till the ceremony is over. There is no telling in what manner she may appreciate the joke."

He crossed to Em's side; at the same time Mr. Crease appeared at the altar to conduct the marriage ceremony. He was very red and very trembling; he looked nervously over his book at me for an instant, and guessing what thought had crossed his mind, I blushed for an instant also. Was I unfeeling enough also to smile a little to myself at a fancy picture of Mr. Crease—how stout

he began to look in full canonicals!—standing at the altar with me, and Mr. Gapwing facing us as officiating priest? When the feelings are not touched by the sentiment at the heart of another, how easy it is to smile, and see the ludicrous side of things! Yet he would have made me a good husband, this poor, unpretending, simple-minded curate; and I should have been a dutiful and affectionate wife, if I had ever made up my mind to take him for better for worse. I felt ashamed of my smile the instant afterwards; I might have missed my one chance of happiness in this world; and that was not a pleasant fact to smile at, even on a day when my heart was lighter than its wont.

The marriage was perfected between John Kingsworth and Emma Eaves; never were responses on either side uttered so honestly and firmly. They answered to their promises as though they meant to keep them all their lives, and I felt certain then that "the best" had happened for them both.

Emma had not refinement enough to disguise her sense of happiness. People of well-trained minds

would have been disgusted at her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes.

In the vestry, leaning over the great parish book, to sign her name therein, she looked up, pen in hand, at her husband, laughingly.

"Do you remember, Jack, teaching me to write, and scolding me for not keeping the lines, in Whiffen Street?" she said.

"Yes—and you're going down-hill now. Look at you!"

Out of the vestry, after bride and bridegroom had received the congratulations of the curate, through the village folk, who had given themselves a holiday to see the wedding, and regretted the waste of time exceedingly—but what *style* could have been expected from an unequal match of this character!—along the aisle of the old church to the front doors, which opened almost in our faces, and brought a new comer upon the scene—Richard Stewart!

"Whose wedding is this?" he asked, abruptly.

"Whose wedding!—mine, to be sure!" replied John Kingsworth. "I am just in time for your congratulations."

"Oh! with—Emma Eaves!" he said, looking at the bride by his side. "I wish you joy, you two. I thought it might have been—*you*, Miss Casey."

"Oh! no."

He turned and walked out with us—keeping by my side, after exchanging greetings with Miss Mannington, who had changed colour at the sight of him, for he was more like his brother than ever.

Bel Mannington shrank back despite my efforts to keep her at my side, and include her in the conversation; she appeared to be as much afraid of Richard Stewart as of John Kingsworth. Had her awakening to the true character of Mr. Stewart's intentions given her a distaste for the whole male sex; or did she shrink away from those who had known of her past engagement, and now returned upon the scene to pity her?

Mr. Richard Stewart was evidently well and strong—his face more bronzed by sojourning in a new land, and his eyes more round and staring, perhaps, with looking about him at the wonders he had seen there.

"So they have made a match of it at last," said Richard Stewart, pointing to the married couple

in advance of us; "they have been a long while learning to understand one another?"

"Yes."

"To thoroughly understand one another takes time," said Richard Stewart, thoughtfully. "This Miss Mannington, who is so scared by my presence —is she happy?" he asked, in a low voice.

"She has met with trouble lately."

"She has lost her fortune—is that a trouble to her?"

"Not the money's loss—but the loss of faith in him who should have protected her through life!"

"You mean her father, of course?"

"Yes."

I did not mean his brother, of whom he had been thinking also, I knew, by his next words.

"Twice disappointed, poor girl!" he said; "and yet not wholly broken down!—she whom a straw would turn!"

"She has altered, I think, for the better."

"She has been in good hands."

He did not intend it as a compliment wherewith to embarrass me; he quite started when my cheeks reddened a little at his last remark.

"My brother you have not seen in Wilthorpe since the breaking off of his engagement with Miss Mannington?" he said, hastening to change the subject.

"No. Have you——"

"I have not seen him for some years," said Richard Stewart, a little mournfully; "that first and last quarrel parted us irrevocably."

"I hope not. It is not natural."

"I told him that whilst the engagement existed between him and Miss Mannington I would never be his friend," said Richard Stewart. "Perhaps I said more than I meant, for I was excited and angry—and yet the engagement is over, and he makes no sign."

"You are the elder brother—it is your place."

"I am the brother in the right—he in the wrong. And yet it was his first weakness; and he had been before that time all that was noble and true. Why, Miss Casey," he burst forth, with his old generous appreciation of his brother's virtues, "once there was not such a fellow in the world as Mark —he would have gone twenty miles out of his way to serve a stranger, or help a man that was

unfortunate; he was the soul of everything that was honourable; he had the gift—what a rare gift it is!—of winning everybody's heart towards him; making friends—good ones, too—as easily as other men make enemies. There was only one verdict upon him, and that was in everybody's mouth, 'What a good fellow that Mark Stewart is!'"

"You and he will be the true friends again you once were. You are brothers, and should bear no malice. Seek him out."

"I could not bear to *see* him turn away from me," said Richard Stewart; "I haven't the courage to face him; and he—he hasn't the humility to come to me, and say that I judged him correctly in the past, and saw whither his great fault would lead him."

"A great fault; but one which the world ever readily excuses."

"Seeking a wife for her fortune's sake? Oh! yes, the world excuses *that* very readily, Miss Casey, and admires the ingenuity of the fortune-hunter who is successful enough to secure the money-bags. The man is a clever fellow, with a soul above the sickly sentimentalities which poets

tire us with! But what does the wife think afterwards, I wonder—the wife which this matter-of-fact world never dreams of pitying?"

"We will not discuss the question," I said; "the time and circumstance will not allow it."

"Right. And before us is a hero, who marries for love."

"Is he *quite* a hero in your estimation, Mr. Stewart?"

Richard Stewart looked grave for an instant, and then laughed.

"Why, you are thinking of that cheque still!" he said; "oh! I have got rid of that subject pretty well. He sent me two thousand pounds as conscience-money, and he tries very hard to make me believe that another two thousand pounds flies into the window; and if he took all that trouble, why he was sorry enough for the past temptation."

"Then you still believe——"

"I am not going to argue any more about it," he said firmly; "and I haven't come a long journey to rake up the bygones and set you against me. I wish Miss Mannington would not keep

away from us. Perhaps I'm not acting well in monopolizing your attention."

"I will step back to her."

But Bel Mannington had already passed on in advance, and we could see her crossing the lawn of Meadow House, which we were now approaching.

"She was very fond of Mark—she *must* have been fond of him," said Richard Stewart, reflectively; "I wonder what she thinks of my brother now, or whether in her heart she has forgiven him. You know, perhaps?"

"No."

Later in the day I could not have answered that question in the negative.

"But we'll not talk of anything dismal on a wedding morning," said Richard Stewart, wrenching himself away from the subject; "I shall have to say good-bye to you in a minute. You know the last news?—you have heard of my investment?"

"Yes—I should have congratulated you on your success in life."

"You are very kind—I have been somewhat

fortunate abroad, if not so fortunate as most people think. I came to Woundell out of curiosity, just to see what the old place would fetch, and with no more intention of purchasing the estate than you had. But when I saw that it was likely to be knocked down at a price beneath its value—I who knew the value of it to a farthing;—and when it was at the option of the purchaser to buy it right out, or allow three-fourths of the purchase-money to remain on mortgage, I sank the whole of my savings in the speculation, agreed to pay a quarter of the money down, and so bound myself to Wilthorpe again for good and all. And how tired you will get of me, to be sure!"

"I must try and bear with you," I said, caustically.

"This is a business speculation," he said; "and I fancy—it may be all fancy—that I shall find the venture profitable. The Hall and Park I shall let to any great folk who may fancy the dwelling-place; and the farm land, and the property attached thereto, I shall work on my own account, in lieu of *hers*. And if I don't succeed, why there's no

one to regret the circumstance but—Richard Stewart."

We were at the gate of my house, where John Kingsworth waited for us. Emma Eaves had left him, and flown after Bel Mannington to tell her how happy she was.

"I haven't had time to ask you to join us at our small wedding breakfast, Mr. Stewart," said John. "I am beginning a new life from to-day, and you are an old enemy of whom I would make a friend."

"Why?"

"Well, that's inexplicable," replied my brother; "possibly because you are a friend of the girl whom I thought my sister for so many years, and she has always taken your part when I have expressed an opinion against you."

"Has she?"

I never saw a face change more suddenly than Richard Stewart's. It was quite a beaming face on the instant.

"I couldn't make you out, and possibly I misjudged you. But that confounded two thousand pounds, and all those clumsy tricks of yours——"

"If you are going to talk about that affair," said Richard Stewart, "let us take a seat here for a while, and have the matter out. Perhaps looking more soberly at it from the distance, I may see that you were not entirely to blame."

"Confound it, Stewart!—you don't mean to say now that——"

"Will Mr. Richard Stewart accept your invitation, or decline it?" I asked, breaking in upon their old topic of dissension.

"I am not in wedding costume, and shall be intruding," he said, blushing and stammering in a way very unusual for him.

"You are my sister's friend."

"Am I?" he said, looking wistfully towards me; "in that capacity, I'll stay. Is he correct, Miss Casey?"

"We were never enemies, Mr. Stewart."

"No—then I'll join you. I have been very much alone the last two years," he added quite apologetically; "very lonely and very dull; that's confessing a great deal for a man who always tried hard to make the best of it. I'm coming to your

wedding feast firmly convinced that I shall be very much in the way; and yet, I'd rather come. It's curious!"

CHAPTER V.

CONFESSION.

RICHARD STEWART joined us at our humble wedding breakfast, then. For the first time in my life he sat down side by side with me—a guest at my table.

The position was novel—the character he assumed that day was novel also. Travel had improved Richard Stewart; the world of Wilthorpe had narrowed his ideas somewhat, and rendered him dogmatic; in a wider sphere they had expanded, and he was even less brusque in his way than in the old days.

Finding the company somewhat thoughtful, he put on his best manners, and I was a witness to *them* also for the first time. His pleasant smile, his new impulse to be agreeable and courteous, re-

minded me once more of his brother—reminded more forcibly Bel Mannington, whose face at times assumed a scared almost an alarmed look at the similitude.

Richard Stewart was in good spirits that day—he owned that fact himself.

"I am glad to get back to the old place," he said. "Wilthorpe is home, and I have not been happy away from it."

They were going away in the afternoon, Emma and John Kingsworth. Everything had been arranged beforehand for that separation. John had been twice to London since the first publication of the banns, arranging matters with the solicitors about his property, about receipts of money and future transmission of money to him; he was going to Australia with his wife, to begin life again after a bran new fashion—a fashion that I thought would succeed, with an earnest loving woman to take care of him.

For the first time in life also Emma Eaves smiled at Richard Stewart. In the sunshine wherein she stood, she would not have one figure in the shadow. She was anxious, too, to part

friends with him, and to hear his better opinion of one whom he had long mistrusted. She was ignorant of the interdict that I had set upon a topic concerning which there was never to be agreement, it seemed, and, leaning forward, she called him by his name.

Richard Stewart was talking to Bel Mannington then, using his best exertions to set her at her ease, and to reconcile her to his presence there. On his face I could read an interest in the girl who might have been his brother's wife, and whom that brother had deceived by a profession of attachment; it was the same look with which he had regarded me once. He felt for all those who had loved his brother, and been, like himself, disappointed in him.

"Mr. Stewart, before I go away," Emma Eaves said, "I hope you will grant me a favour."

"I will do my best to grant it," he said, with a reserve; "what is it, Mrs. Kingsworth?"

"Confess that you were mistaken in John—and that your old suspicious thoughts of him were unjust."

Richard Stewart coloured, looked from her to

John Kingsworth, who was colouring also. Why could not this subject be forgotten—sunk to the depths of oblivion, without analyzing the truth or falsehood in it ever again?

"Mrs. Kingsworth must excuse me," he said. "I consider myself under a promise not to speak of this any more."

"Once more," demanded Emma Eaves, with flashing eyes, "if you are honest!"

"Ah! if I be honest!" said Richard Stewart. "You did not think so once, Mrs. Kingsworth!"

"Em, the subject is dropped for ever," said her husband; "Mr. Stewart and I cannot agree upon that old grievance—he may think I took the money, or I may think that he took it—and there is just a chance that we may both be wrong. If this mystery had been cleared up two years since, I might have been a happier man."

"It was cleared up!" cried Bel Mannington, with an emphasis that brought all looks towards her; "my father cleared it up to you, John Kingsworth. Why talk of having been unhappy by it?"

"Your father?—no!"

John shook his head in a very decided manner at this assertion.

"He told you nothing—then?"

"Nothing!"

"And you are still under suspicion—you two men who were in the house on the night that money was stolen—and my father never kept his promise to me. Well—God forgive me!—*I took that money!*"

We looked at her in dismay.

"Ah! Bertie, you will turn from me now!" she said, looking towards me with a beseeching, even bewildering expression. "I could not own to you all my madness, my wickedness, or bear to see you give me up. It has been a secret which has oppressed me very much—of which I thought only John Kingsworth—and, possibly, you, sir,"—addressing Richard Stewart—"were aware. And the innocent has suffered for my guilty self!"

"What was it for?" I gasped.

"I will tell you, if—if I be strong enough," she said.

"No—no—I see it all now," said Richard Stewart. "I will explain presently!"

"You are very kind to spare me," said Bel, gathering firmness as she proceeded, "but we will attempt the truth, whatever may be the result. I did not shrink to perpetrate the act, and I must not fear to face you with the avowal, now that I learn, for the first time, that I have sown dissension in your midst. Yes, I took that money!"

It seemed scarcely possible even yet. Looking forward to that face—so childlike yet in its expression—one could not imagine its possessor to have been a thief in the night, coveting and scheming for other men's goods.

"I found out by an accident that your brother—he to whom I was engaged to be married then—was beset by creditors, in danger of arrest for a debt contracted in London. That arrest would have beggared him at that time, and hindered all chances of a compromise. One night he confided to me the secret of his embarrassments——"

"Mark did? That was more like him!" said Mark's brother.

"He told me all, and offered to resign me—as if, believing in his love, I would not have clung to him all the more for his misfortunes! But by

those misfortunes I was troubled very much."

She wrung her hands silently together, then went on again:

"They were waiting for him in the village—the greediest and sharpest of his creditors—English creditors, with the power to arrest him on English ground. For my sake and for his, to keep down opposition to our marriage from my father and Mrs. Kingsworth—both of whom believed him at that time to be a wealthy man—I held that secret close, watched over it with all the vigilance of a jealous woman. He was in more danger than he believed; one creditor had been appeased by Richard Stewart paying him his demand unknown to his brother; but there was a second, a cunning man, who by some means or other was aware of our engagement, and Mrs. Kingsworth's character. That man sought *me* out, believing me the heiress, which I was not, and threatened me with Mark Stewart's ruin, if I did not pay his claim. He would give me twenty-four hours to find the money, or go to Mrs. Kingsworth, or my father, and tell all."

"We guess the rest," said Richard Stewart, still

anxious to curtail the explanation, and save Bel further pain.

Bel took no heed; she was impelled forwards to avow the whole truth; I see her dark face aglow with excitement now, and her wild eyes fixed only upon me, as if to read those looks of horror and shame for which she waited then.

"I was mad that day; I dared not confide that secret to a living soul, and I had been never strong enough to bear one of such weight. I was a child, with no thought of right or wrong—simply beset by the one wish to save my lover, and regardless of all consequences. The devil whispered to me that Richard Stewart was in possession of a large sum of money, proceeds of the quarter's rents, &c.—he had been to the Hall that day; he had returned too late for the banker's at Woundell —in the dusk of the evening came the last temptation. Mrs. Kingsworth gave me her keys to fetch some papers from her desk, and the one chance of doing evil—I thought it good at that time!—suggested itself. I knew where the duplicate key of Mr. Stewart's safe was kept, and I secured it. I stole down in half an hour's time to the lodge;

John Kingsworth was asleep before the fire, and Mr. Stewart was absent. I took two thousand pounds from the safe, and went in search of the man who had threatened ruin if he were not paid in full within four and twenty hours. I paid him, and went back to the Hall. I knew my guilt then—I felt that it was madness by which I had been possessed, and I dreaded the consequence of my unwomanly act. I found means to return the key to the safe, and then I was left to play the hypocrite, and struggle with my weight of thought."

I remembered then her excited demeanour on that memorable night.

"Mr. Stewart added to my trouble by telling me how he had encountered this man, and what threats had been held over him also; all that night he feared—alas! not for my sake—the coming of that man to the Hall to denounce him. I knew that he was safe, and at what cost to me! I had begun to think then of the result, of whose character it might affect, of how soon it would be possible to pay back that two thousand pounds to my aunt, or to confess my inability to pay it and ask her pardon. We were to be married, Mark

Stewart and I, at a very early date, then—when we were married, I would tell all to Mark and her, and pay back that money from my wedding portion. All these foolish thoughts added to the torture of how the loss would be received—whether the mystery, as I hoped, would remain inexplicable, or set suspicion on a guilty head. You know what followed too well—I could not tell my aunt that secret, tortured as I was by my duplicity —I felt that I dared not own how guilty I had been to her who had such power to mar my whole life's happiness, until the last—the very, very last! I had resolved, rather than that she should die believing in her son's guilt, to confess the whole truth; but I hoped in John Kingsworth's presence at her bedside, and that his assurance of his honesty would save me my confession. Then came the telegram, and Mrs. Kingsworth's mind was at rest. She was very happy, and I could not mar her dying hours by breaking down her love and hopes in me. She died, Bertie, believing in my truth—in mine!"

She wailed forth the last words with a touching earnestness that went to all our hearts; I saw her

guilt, but I knew her woman's weakness—ever that mental weakness of her family, which in her father, aunt, and herself, had assumed such wild phases of moral perversity—and there did not fade away from me one jot of that love which long ago I had entertained towards her. She was my weak sister, who had sinned; who had let one worldly passion blind her to the consequences of crime, and had fallen very much—but I could not turn away from her, do anything but press her to my side and draw her head down to my bosom. It had been a terrible confession for a wedding feast, where peace, love, and harmony should have presided; but Bel Mannington had been deceived in her turn, and from her impulse had evolved the sad story in its entirety. She had believed that reparation had been made; that not only had the money been paid back, but that John Kingsworth had been informed by Bel's father, to whom the story had been told, of all those sad details which had been hurled from her lips that day.

"You—you do not turn away from me, Bertie?" she murmured, passing her arms round my neck.

"Is it likely?" I whispered; "and—and Mr. Stewart?"

"Has never known this secret. I dared not tell him," she answered, "I—I did it all for love of him, and I—I could accuse him of want of principle in my anger and conceit. Oh! Bertie," in a voice inaudible to all but me, "I loved him very, very much!"

CHAPTER VI.

PARTING.

ALL this was a skeleton at the wedding feast—a *memento mori!* Before those who had plighted troth, and were hopeful of their future, rose the evidence of her who had seen her best hopes die, and brought evil upon her own head. It was no pleasant sequel to the morning's brightness, and yet I felt that from this confession of Bel Mannington would evolve better and purer feelings in her, and a faith and friendship between two men who had regarded each other as untrustworthy.

Already, at that early hour, with Bel still clinging to me, I noted that John Kingsworth drew a deep breath of relief, and that Richard Stewart

looked across the table at him, and finally held forth his hand.

"I am sorry that I suspected you, Kingsworth," Stewart said, in his deep, and not unmoved voice.

"And I am sorry that I could not shake off the impression of what a hypocrite you were, Stewart. But——"

"But——"

The two words were spoken at once, and both turned towards Bel Mannington again. I held my hand above her dark hair for silence. More revelations were not for that day, I thought, and this suffering woman had been tried too much.

"Bel," I whispered, "I would not stay here any longer. Let us leave the room with Emma; it is time she put on her travelling dress."

"Yes—yes, directly," she said feverishly. Then she struggled from my arms and sat up again. "I did my best to make atonement," she said, dashing, to my surprise, into the old subject, which I had considered at an end for that day. "When suspicion fastened itself upon you, Mr. Kingsworth, I told all to my father, and bade him pay

you from my money the sum of which I had defrauded you. I bade him tell you of my sorrow for my guilt, of my wish that you should keep my secret, except when it was necessary to defend your honour from the imputations that might be levelled at you. And my father never told you?"

"No."

"He paid you the money. He took his oath to me that the money was in your hands—he showed me the entry in his banker's book, proving that two thousand pounds had been drawn from his account in your favour."

"He put the money on my breakfast table. He kept his word to that extent at least."

"Then who sent me the two thousand pounds conscience money?" ejaculated Richard Stewart.

"It was not a *ruse*, then, to satisfy your own scruples as to your want of care of my poor mother's money?" asked John, eagerly.

"Now, by George! if you begin that again!" exclaimed Richard Stewart, bringing his fist down on the table, "I'll think all this a dream, and you the thief still!"

"I have it!" cried John Kingsworth; "it was your brother Mark!"

"I think you're right," said Richard Stewart, thoughtfully; "yes, he guessed Miss Mannington's dilemma, and mine, and sent that cheque."

"No, no—he would know all then!" cried Bel, becoming again wild and excited; "oh! don't say that!"

But Richard Stewart was right.

"We'll not say anything more about it, please," said Emma. "I must not go away and leave you unhappy like this, Miss Mannington—you the young mistress, who was kind to me when I thought that I had only one friend in the world. If you have done wrong—I'm sure that you are sorry for it. I would have done the same for John!"

We looked a little surprised at this criminal sentiment, but Emma stood her ground for her own opinion's sake, or Bel Mannington's, it was doubtful which. She and Bel had resembled each other in more than one particular—once upon a time I had termed them kindred spirits. In Bel's place Emma Kingsworth might have been hurled away from right as easily—the temptation had not

come to her, and the subject was not worth considering. Suffice it that neither she nor poor penitent Bel was a heroine, and that being far from a heroine myself, the story lacks one interesting quality at least.

In the short time left to us we did our best to sink the shadows; succeeding pretty well in our endeavours, and leaving to future days a grave consideration of the truth. We three women who had lived together, and been friends, almost sisters together, were never to sit down in friendly communion again; one of us was going a long journey, to face a future wherein trials might be waiting for her—we must consider her a little!

Richard Stewart and Kingsworth were true friends in thought from that day. I have sometimes fancied that perhaps Bel's confession was the last feather in the scale turning already in John's favour, to make him a different man.

John and Emma Kingsworth I can afford to dismiss here from my pages. The hour is late, and the end is at hand. Stealing from the distance is the mist of coming evening, and one by one my

figures are vanishing away; with them, and in good time, this faulty record of my life's experience. I seek no better fate than that, content with the passing interest of those good friends who have borne me company so long. Books are born and die every day; if I be not of the immortal few I at least escape a good deal of that hatred and uncharitableness by which they are assailed. I count more friends than enemies—I am of no party, and I envy no one's triumph. I shall beg no favour from the crowd, and I shall stir up nobody's bile by my untoward success. I am simply Bertha Casey—though I write as if I were one of those fledglings who have their livings to get by their novels, poor things!

And I am forgetting John Kingsworth and his wife. Well, they went abroad and lived "happy ever afterwards." Can I say more?

They were happy in good fortune and in bad. They had bad fortune, inasmuch as they lost much money in their early days abroad; but the little skiff in which they had embarked together righted itself before all the money was gone; and John worked on patiently, lost no prudence, and was

kept ever strong and persevering by his helpmate.

Not so rich a man as when his mother left him a large fortune, but a better one. And being never ambitious he took his losses philosophically, and found his peace and happiness in his wife and children round him.

Thus he fades away; and I turn to my last record.

END OF BOOK THE SIXTH.

BOOK VII.

CLEARS UP ALL INTENTIONS.

CHAPTER I.

BROUGHT BACK.

ONCE more "settling down!" Once more endeavouring to take our places by the waters that had seethed round us, and were so still and glassy now! Here, soberly sitting on the bank, we settled down for good!

Yes, surely for good now? All was over; all had been satisfactorily explained; Emma had gone away; Mr. Mark Stewart was in Edinburgh, and Mr. Richard Stewart was oscillating between his new property and Woundell, between Wilthorpe and London, and settling by degrees—not fairly settled like ourselves! By-and-bye, he would be the Richard Stewart of old times, business-like and brusque even; watchful of the interests of the estate in which he had invested; making his fortune by

degrees, after the fashion which best pleased him, and growing old, and weather-beaten; not much liked by those with whom he had but a passing acquaintance, and only understood by one or two.

When he was in Wilthorpe, he called twice to see us—once upon the day of his arrival, once upon the day of his departure to settle some business from home. He took his place in our parlour as a friend, and no one gainsaid his claim; he seemed like a brother, in whose good advice we two women could trust, and whose interest in us we knew to be sincere. If there were one thing to object to in his visits, it was his *watchfulness* of us; he seemed to sit and study us intently, as though he were trying to guess our thoughts; he wished to make sure that we were quite happy in our minds, and that there was nothing in his power that he could do. I think that he would have been grateful for some small calamity, from which he might have rescued us. The calamity not coming at that period, he sat and stared, taking five minutes at a time for each of us, and not particular about too much conversation.

In October he said that he should be at his old post; even at the old Lodge, in three weeks time. Foreign matters had been cleared up; he had arranged, at Kingsworth's request, a plan for the transmission of money to him—John Kingsworth had given him, the man whom he had so long suspected, a power of attorney, to act for him in all monetary affairs not settled before his departure for Australia—he had paid the fourth part of the purchase money, completed the mortgage, and he was, as I have before remarked, nearly ready to settle down also!

In three weeks to the day—he kept his time with his old punctuality—Richard Stewart was at the Lodge again. The new tenant had been found for the Hall; he was content with a limited estate, and his landlord living in a small cottage thereon—one of the strangest pictures for a large landowner that the county could produce; but then these Stewarts were uncommonly strange, the neighbours said to one another, and there was no making them out.

Had I even made them out, or their intentions, after a knowledge that, judging by events, seemed

life-long? Had Bel Mannington? I was sorry to see that Bel Mannington had settled down too deeply into her own train of thoughts, and that the young, variable life which I had pictured on its way to the surface, seemed now irrevocably submerged. After that confession at the wedding-breakfast, she had sunk "deeper and deeper" still. She had hoped that that secret and myself would have never come in contact—for she had feared that even I would give her up then.

Well, I held the more firmly to her. I did not preach at her; I took the penitent to my heart; I believed in her repentance, and I made due allowance for what juries term "extenuating circumstances." She had done it all for love—"everything is fair in love," says the proverb—and she had acted in a reckless way worthy of "the family."

Still, beneath this gravity of Bel Mannington ran an under-current of restlessness—she would be soon dependent upon me, she considered; presently it would be her duty to seek her own living, when she had fairly considered what that living should be, and when she was quite sure that she was strong enough to seek it.

I was glad at last to encourage this restless feeling—anything was better than her unnatural gravity. I never intended to part with her; when it came to a struggle between her will and mine, I would hold her to my heart and keep her there—telling her of the loneliness to which she would reduce me. But it was as well just then to let her speculate upon her future course—it drew the thoughts away from the disappointments of her life, and the evil that had accompanied them. I trusted to time—and for once in my life, though in a different way to that which I had conceived, I was not disappointed.

It was a bleak morning, I remember, when I went one day marketing to Wilthorpe. Bel had been unwell all the week, suffering from a cold that she had caught through her usual indifference to dry weather or wet, if I kept not a careful watch upon her. It was with some difficulty that I persuaded her to remain at home that raw November morning, and to nurse herself during my absence.

"Don't be long!" was her invariable injunction to me, when I started upon a mission without

her; and "Don't be long!" was echoed after me that day, telling of her objection to loneliness and the company of her own thoughts.

I reached Wilthorpe, transacted my domestic business, met a few friendly faces, gossiped about the weather and the coming winter, and turned to retrace my way, when a gentleman approached me.

His step behind me, his shadow at my side, impressed me with a vague consciousness of the truth, before one word was uttered. We make such strange guesses occasionally, and this was one of them.

"Miss Casey, may I beg the favour of a few words with you?"

"Mr. Stewart!"

I stopped to shake hands with Mark Stewart, the man whose vague "intentions" had worked such mischief in my little world. He coloured as I extended my hand towards him; it seemed an act of courtesy which he had scarcely expected on my part.

"I am glad to see you, Miss Casey," he said.

"I have been waiting about the village for an hour, praying for a face I knew. You will not think me intrusive if I accompany you a little distance upon your way?"

I bowed assent, and he walked on with me, away from the village. In the time that had intervened since our last meeting, he did not appear to have altered very much; there was the same handsome face, the same outspoken look which won men's hearts towards him; here and there might have been a faint line that I had not seen before, and which was indicative of hard thought rather than of any mark that time had set upon him at three-and-thirty years of age. It was, upon the whole, a stern face, as though, in fighting his new battle for his old position, that indomitable resolution which had kept him strong had found some reflex in his countenance.

"It must seem strange to you, Miss Casey, to meet me once again in Wilthorpe."

"Not at all."

He had given me my cue by that suggestion, and the opportunity was not to be lost.

"Not at all!" he echoed, wondering; "why, the few who remember me in Wilthorpe have marvelled wondrously this morning."

"I do not wonder, Mr. Stewart," I said; "you have a brother here, and it is your duty to show that you have not forgotten him."

"Yes, I know that," he answered, "and I need not come here to keep my memory fresh concerning him. But he and I are never likely to be friends again, Miss Casey."

"For shame, sir!" I exclaimed; "he is your brother, and you professed to love him much at one time. It is a cruel enmity that keeps you apart from one another."

"You will pardon me, but it is no enmity—rather let me say, my brother's scorn of the folly which led me wrong and took him from my side. Have you known Dick so long, and not already have seen his unforgiving nature?"

"Have *you* been so long deceived in him?"

"My brother always keeps his word—it was my pride as well as his to assert once that the promise of a Stewart had never been broken. His word stands ever between him and me."

"A word spoken in the heat of anger, and of which he has repented, I am sure."

"I cannot ask him if that version be correct," said Mr. Stewart, with a coldness that was badly assumed; "he is the elder brother, and must seek me out. If he care no longer for me, or take no longer an interest in me, I must accept that evidence as proof of our division, till he breaks it down himself."

"You are a proud man—and stand in your own light."

"I have very little to be proud of!" was his answer. "In my life I have made more than one mistake; and once I have been verily ashamed and punished. I *was* a proud man, Miss Casey!"

"You have not come to see your brother, then?"

"No. I have a money debt to pay him through his agent—I have been anxious to pay him for some time, but his absence abroad has baffled me. He is in Wilthorpe?"

"Yes."

"Well, I hope?"

"Quite well, Mr. Stewart."

"Has travelling altered him?—I used to fancy

that he always looked older than he was; and Dick's not five-and-thirty till next year. Dick five-and-thirty!—why, I can't believe it. But," correcting himself as he detected an effort in me to repress a smile, "I have not intruded upon you to make inquiries about my brother—the questions which I feel inclined to ask, I would have preferred to put to those less likely to be embarrassed by my curiosity; and yet you are the only friend in whom I can trust to tell me the whole truth concerning *her*."

"Concerning Miss Mannington?"

"Yes."

He walked on a few steps by my side in silence, with his hands behind him, and his gaze directed to the wintry-looking ground. What did he want to ask me about her?—what were his intentions *now*?

"Miss Casey," he began, very suddenly and quickly, "I have heard, very lately, and by a mere accident, a story that I can scarcely credit. Is it true that Miss Mannington has been left alone in the world?"

"Not true, sir. She is with me, a friend and sister."

"You are always thoughtful—I might have guessed that," he said; "but she has been deserted by her father—robbed by him of that large fortune bequeathed to her by Mrs. Kingsworth?"

"She had hoped to keep this a secret for her name's sake—she had no wish that her father's duplicity should reach the outer world. How did you hear this?"

"Secrets like these are impossible to keep, Miss Casey. This is a busy world, where rumours, well or ill-founded, spread their course along for good or evil—we can scarcely tell which at the outset. It is true, then?"

"Yes—it is true."

"I am very sorry to hear it; she is dependent upon you, then?"

"No, sir—her father did not leave her penniless."

"That is bad news!"

"Sir!"

I turned upon him rather a surprised face, and he stammered forth,

"Good news, I should have said. I was afraid that she had been left entirely destitute. I did not

understand her position, and—and I came to Wilthorpe to discover it for myself. I can be of no help here, then, and I may turn my back upon this place for ever."

We were passing Meadow House, but I did not pause before it. He was unaware of my new locality, and full of his own thoughts, proceeded mechanically by my side, step by step. I glanced towards my parlour window, but the curtains were draped thickly behind the glass, and the day was misty. I could see nothing, and I hoped that Bel had not been at her old post watching for my return, as a child for its mother's. He went on with me unconsciously; he did not seem to be aware that he was approaching the Hall, and his brother's cottage; or else he did not dream for an instant that Richard Stewart had returned to the old home with the old life.

"If she had been very poor, very friendless and cast down, I might have offered her—my purse," he added after a pause; "that her pride would have refused, and the mission would still have been as profitless and vain. I may ask one favour of an old friend?"

"What is it?"

"That you will keep from her this meeting with me. The mention of my name must give her pain still."

"Naturally."

"Miss Casey," he said suddenly, "I wonder what you think of me?—you of all friends, old or new, treasured once or lost! I wonder what you *can* think of me, judging my character by what you have seen and heard, and meeting me again in sober after-years, when the judgment has been matured, and the fair verdict arrived at?"

I was a little alarmed at his manner, and he saw it. I did not like this strong man to lose his self-command, and address me wildly—plead, as it were, indirectly for a better opinion of him than his fears assured him that I had. Still I answered:

"You have been mistaken once or twice in life," I said in reply, "but you have meant well in all instances but one. In that one you were tempted by your business losses to win Bel Mannington's heart, and thus shadow her young life after the dream was over."

"You think ill of me for that—and yet you knew it in the days when Mrs. Kingsworth lived, and called me friend."

"I did not know it. I had more faith in your honesty of purpose, and believed that——"

I would not say more. I made an angry gesture with my hand, implying all the rest, and he understood me and my disjointed sentence, and did not press the sequel. I believed that he had loved Bel Mannington and tired of me; but I could not tell him so, knowing that he had loved me, and that his life and mine, but for a few hasty words, would have been so different.

He would have been a poor man, and I should have been his wife; his life might not have been happy with me, for he was ambitious and proud of the position to which he had attained —the time might have come when he would have repented of the match. I was glad then in my heart—very, very glad!—that all was over with him and me for ever. The thoughts I have recorded made me glad, I fancied; I had not the courage to analyze too deeply, and on that country

road, with Mark Stewart at my side, there was no fitting opportunity.

"I shall tell no one of my reasons for coming hither," he said, "even if any one were disposed to believe them. I have your promise to regard this visit as a secret."

"You have, sir."

"When I have paid my brother the money that I owe him, I shall have shown to the world—this little-minded world of Wilthorpe," he added somewhat scornfully, "a fair reason for my presence. You, Miss Casey, might accept that money for him, and spare us both the embarrassment of meeting."

"You have only to meet to be friends," I said.

"I think not," was his doubtful answer.

"Then I will take the money, if you wish it."

I would take it if he wished it, when I had led him to his brother's presence; I felt a strong desire to see those two men shake hands and forget the bitterness of their one quarrel. I would see this "little-minded world" of mine at peace, and I had faith in the result of the meeting for which I schemed. If I could only lead him to his brother's

cottage and be a mediator between them, I felt I should be happier.

I spoke about this money to keep his thoughts employed and his keen observant sense from noticing too much the route that I had chosen; and he told me of the money his brother had paid an obnoxious creditor, in his anxiety to afford him, Mark Stewart, time to turn and escape the doom of bankruptcy.

"The creditors frightened Dick," said Mark Stewart, warming with his subject; "he knew that I only wanted time to call my friends together and explain, and this man threatened my arrest. This man had no trust in me either, Miss Casey," he added bitterly, "and Dick paid him off, against my knowledge, for we had quarrelled then. Only a little while ago that honest fellow," he said, warming again to his subject, "had told me that he had saved nearly five thousand pounds from the liberal salary Mrs. Kingsworth, who knew his value, had allowed him—and after we had quarrelled he paid it all away to keep the clutch of a bailiff from my shoulder. Can you understand how a man could open his purse to aid a man against whom

he had shut his heart—for if so, you understand my brother."

"I think I understand him—I hope so."

My hand was on the wicket of his brother's fence. We were before the Hall again. It was the old home scene, at which he recoiled a step.

"The cottage!—you living here!" he murmured.

"Mrs. Kingsworth left me a house upon the estate," I said, feeling quite wicked at my evasion; and yet terribly anxious to lead him on still.

"Time makes many changes," he said; "I—I will leave you here, if you will kindly take my cheque for the debt I owe my brother."

"I must write you a receipt at least—I am a business woman, Mr. Stewart. Will you step inside?"

"Thank you, but I—I would rather not enter that house. My brother will send the acknowledgment of this cheque, which I have already drawn out."

"I cannot take the money without a receipt," was my persistent answer. "I must refer you to your brother, Mr. Stewart, for a settlement of this debt, then."

"I give in to you, Miss Casey," he said, a little irritably. "I am in your hands, if you will not let me trust your honesty."

He came along the garden path with a quick step after me; my heart beat faster as I went towards the door, praying that Richard Stewart might be at home. I did not knock at the door in the first instance; I tried the primitive latch, and the door gave to my touch—sure sign that Richard Stewart was in the parlour.

As I opened the door and stepped at once into the room, Richard Stewart, round-eyed and wondering, rose from his early dinner, knife and fork in hand, and stared at me.

"What has happened now?" he said.

"Your brother Mark—be friends with him—*I wish it!*"

I do not know why I should have added that last inducement to make friends. I was excited, and scarcely knew what I was saying then.

The tall man following me stooped his head at the low doorway, and came in, halting aghast at the figure that confronted him there.

"Two children of one mother, left alone in the world to love and help each other—shake hands, you two!" I cried.

Richard Stewart dropped his knife and fork, and stretched out both his hands towards his brother.

"Mark!"

"Dick—old—fellow!"

As their hands met, I ran out of the house, and closed the door behind me, leaving them together. I ran all the way home like a wild thing, and cried part of the way, for what reason I have scarcely ever been able to make out!

CHAPTER II.

NOT SETTLED YET.

I FOUND Bel Mannington anxious for my return—feverish as well as anxious. I guessed that the secret of Mr. Stewart's presence in Wilthorpe would not require much care in keeping, by my first glance towards her. Well, here was somebody to calm, and some wild thoughts to distract; something in *my* way! The reader perceives that I was becoming conceited again; well, that is my great failing, and it is no use disguising the fact any longer. Perhaps the reader has a suspicion that I have a wonderful idea of my own cleverness; so have you, dear reader, though you don't print the admission, or tell *every one* of your friends!

"Bertie," cried Bel, the old excited, impetuous

Bel Mannington, and how glad I was to catch her in my arms, "was it—was it *he*?"

"Yes, it was Mr. Stewart. In Wilthorpe, here on business with his brother."

"They are friends, then?"

"Yes—they are friends again, I am glad to say!"

"I saw you pass the window, too absorbed to notice the house, or my figure in the background watching you. Oh! Bertie, I am really glad that he has come back again. I thought he would."

"My dear Bel, you don't think——"

"Yes, yes, I do," she interrupted, becoming more feverish still, "I have thought it all along. You are his first love, and he has loved no one else. I felt that some day he would make all the reparation in his power, and restore your faithful heart to happiness. For he was never a bad man—only led away, in a time of trouble, to a temptation which he regrets now. He——"

I interrupted her in my turn.

"And you think that I love Mark Stewart still! On my honour, Bel, by my woman's pride, Bel, if he were to ask me to-morrow to become his wife, I could

but tell him 'No!'—a thousand times 'No!' You cannot conceive how well and thoroughly I have dismissed all tender recollection here."

I touched my heart lightly as I spoke, and she murmured:

"I can scarcely think that."

I was sorry for that thought of hers—not for my sake, but for her own. I saw then more clearly the confirmation of an old suspicion that she had not forgotten him, that she could not have repeated my answer word for word without her lip quivering and her looks betraying her. She had given him up; I could not see or believe in a power that would bring her to his side again, or him to hers; but I could see more clearly then the truth, and I knew there was no peace of mind for her whilst she treasured up the past, and brooded on her passion in it. Knowing that disease, I could cure it in good time, I thought; change would do it—absence from home would do it; I had chained her too selfishly to past memories at this home in Wilthorpe.

Hers was a mind, weak and unstable, and yet clinging to one fact, which shadowed every-

thing; I must do my best with it; I had not done it yet. I accused myself even in that moment of neglecting her, and I knew that for a while it was best to quit Wilthorpe, where every turn of the place had its grim retrospect.

Later that very day, I commenced my task of paving the way for a temporary absence from Wilthorpe. I spoke of "change" to Bel—change even at that season of the year, with the winter coming on! Bel looked at me in wonderment; was I afraid of meeting Mr. Stewart?—had I not the courage to meet him now? were her first thoughts, perhaps.

But Mr. Stewart would go away before we left our quiet village; I did not speak of a hasty departure; but when Bel herself was better, and I, like a careful housewife, had left my place properly in order. There were no ties to keep us single women bound to Wilthorpe; no one cared *much* about us, and the best friend we had had was sleeping in her vault in Wilthorpe church. Bel and I would travel in a humble way from place to place, until we yearned for home again!

Was I restless too at that period?—and was

there even some selfish pleasure at the bottom of my project for Bel's good? It was more than possible. I knew what was best for Bel, but I understood that I was becoming depressed in Wilthorpe also, and there was a morbid satisfaction in thinking of one, or *two*, perhaps, who would be sorry to hear of my departure, and glad when I came back again.

The day passed without a sign from either Stewart; I do not know why I should have anticipated a visit from the elder brother—a formal vote of thanks for having been the means of dissipating an old grievance. If I had hoped for such a visit, I was disappointed, till one morning, when Bel, sitting at the breakfast-table with her face to the window, changed colour, and looked towards me.

"Richard Stewart is coming in," she said, "and —and his brother has passed on towards the village!"

"A mere friendly call—you must not become alarmed about small trifles, Bel."

"I am a little nervous now," she said, endeavouring to assume a calm demeanour; "it is my inheritance."

My maid admitted Mr. Richard Stewart into our presence. He came at once towards me, and wrung my hands heartily in his.

"Blessed is the peacemaker, Miss Casey!"

He turned to Bel, and said—

"I hope you appreciate your friend, Miss Mannington? I don't know any woman like her in the world—I wish I did," he added, in a lower tone, that made me start, though the last assertion was not meant for me.

"I think we all love her and appreciate her, Mr. Stewart," said Bel, "a true friend in the sunshine —and the shade."

"Yes, and an artful one, too," he added, with his old abruptness; "by George, that was a trick you played on Mark, telling him that the Lodge was your house."

"I never told him so."

"You implied that fact, but we have both forgiven the evasion. Why, it don't seem possible now that I should have ever quarrelled with Mark —sulked with him for years, when he was in trouble, too. I begin to think that I was in the wrong a little—I was always so pig-headed!"

"Yes," I said.

His eyes widened at my assent to that proposition; I felt in an impudent mood that day. I was very glad that the brothers had become friends, and a little proud of my own assistance to the good work. He laughed after a moment, pleasantly and heartily.

"I am glad to see that we have the old Miss Casey back again this morning."

"Don't taunt me with my age!—*old Miss* Casey, indeed!"

"You know what I mean," he said; "I shan't attempt an explanation or apology."

"Thank you!"

"And the old times with the old Miss Casey, too," he said more gravely; "are we stepping back to them?—the best of times, when we had no ill-feeling in our midst. I almost think so!"

He relapsed into silence, and began twirling his hat round in his hands. He had something more to say; he was looking wistfully, almost sorrowfully at Bel Mannington. For an instant he had forgotten her, and her share in the old times to which he had alluded. Her happiest period, how-

ever, belonged to times of a later date, when Richard Stewart and I were troubled in our minds.

"You have a message for Miss Casey?" said Bel quickly.

"Yes, I have," he answered; "it's a very simple one, but I have found some difficulty in delivering it, because—because—*confound* it, why can't I speak out to-day?"

"Mr. Stewart wishes to speak to me, perhaps?" I said, as calmly and coldly as I could. I did not wish this interview to drift out of the matter-of-fact element pervading it.

"That's it, exactly. He's going back to Edinburgh, and desirous of bidding you good-bye. I—I told him that he ought not to go away like a bear, after all that you have done."

"But for you, then, he *would* have gone away like a bear?" I said.

I was somewhat embarrassed at his altered tone, but I would jest on to the end.

"N—no, he would not have done that, because he is anxious—that is, he wishes to see you for an instant. How long are you going to keep him kicking his heels in the churchyard?"

"In the churchyard!" I exclaimed.

"He could not come here," muttered Richard Stewart; "and the church is at the corner. I don't know that he is in the churchyard—he went that way, that's all."

Somewhat confused, Mr. Richard Stewart having delivered his message, departed. I kept my place, almost resolved not to sally forth at the bidding of this eccentric visitor to meet his brother when he pleased. Bel sat and looked at me for awhile, then dropped to a footstool near me, and gazed up into my face.

"You will go, Bertie?"

"Why should I go?"

"Because—because you have a right to hear him and forgive him. If he be sorry for all the harm that he has done, and unhappy at this long separation from you—you should forgive in *your* turn."

"No, no, Bel; he does not wish me to renew the old engagement—I would not renew it for the world! I could not bring my heart back to its past thoughts of him. I said so yesterday!"

"It is natural that you and he should marry—I hope you will!"

"Bel, you don't know what you're saying!" I exclaimed.

"You have promised to go."

"It will look as if I were afraid of him—as if I had thought of him throughout all these years, if I stay," I said indignantly; "yes, I will go!"

"And when you come back I will say——"

"Nothing that can pain me, I am sure, Bel. Once again, and once for all, let me repeat that I shall never marry Mark Stewart!"

Bel did not believe me for all my stern assurance. She could not understand my firm denial, for I had loved this man as she had done, and time *had* softened all harsh memories. He had at least sought me for myself, and only her for money!

I put on my bonnet and shawl and went out of the house, eager to keep this appointment, and close the interview. I had no fear of any proposal from Mark Stewart; the suggestions of Bel had not frightened me—I had no cause to think of my answer, or prepare for it.

Outside the house Richard Stewart was waiting for me—an attention for which I was not prepared.

"What! are you here still?" I asked.

"I thought you might not feel inclined to come, and in another five minutes I should have knocked again, and begged you, as a favour, to reconsider your decision."

"You are strangely anxious," I said, suspiciously.

"I am—it is natural."

We went on together down the road. His manner began to perplex me; I was becoming nervous about the meeting myself, even inclined to wonder if its purport were really what Bel Mannington had thought, whether I should turn back and send my answer by this man.

"What am I wanted for?" I asked; "was it so great an ordeal to pass through that your brother could not call at my house?"

"Miss Mannington was there—you would not have *them* meet again."

"It would give unnecessary pain to both—well, no!"

"He wishes to see you—he appears very anxious to see you, Miss Bertie; and I am sure that he will appreciate this kindness in meeting him at his request."

Miss Bertie! What did he imply by that designation? Years ago he had called me by that name, when I was to have been his brother's wife; he had spoken of it at that time as the title by which, as *my* future brother, he had a right to call me. Did he think—could he of all men think—that he would ever have that right again? My cheeks flushed, and something rose in my throat and checked my utterance—my blood flowed more quickly in my veins, and I felt vexed with him and all the world for the poor thoughts entertained towards me!

"Do you know—do you know what your brother wants of me?"

"He has not said a word to me concerning his intentions," answered Richard Stewart, who had turned pale at my question.

"Do you *know*, I ask? Why prevaricate like this?"

"I can guess, I think. The difficulty in guessing is not great, Miss Bertie."

"If you call me by that name again, I'll—I'll go back!" I hissed between my teeth.

"I beg your pardon," he said; "it was a liberty,

and I have no right to take it. I—I hoped I might some day though, for the same reason as in the past."

"You *hoped* that!"

I turned upon him with my bated breath and flashing eyes—I faced him, and would have the truth from him. He could not dissemble, and I might trust in his reply.

"If you—you remember him with the old feelings—and you are a true-hearted woman!—I hoped it," he answered.

We went on together more peaceably after that. I felt a load from my heart, and my step was lighter, though my feelings were disturbed still, and the vixen in my nature uppermost.

"A true-hearted woman, then, is one that puts up with every humiliation for the sake of the man who coolly tells her that it is best to part with him—who keeps her old love pure and true, whilst his goes wandering?"

"If he loved truly also, and yet his weak judgment decided in an evil hour against the union—if he come back to say——"

"He never comes back to say that here; and if

he do, he comes too late," I answered. "I have heard this silly argument, or something like it, before, and the sooner it is closed the better."

"Miss Casey," he said, very humbly, but so earnestly, that I could but listen to him patiently. "I do not wish to argue on this matter, but I do not wish you, in a hasty moment, to throw away a chance that may make you and my brother very happy. You must pardon me if I offend you, but you are not happy—I have known it for some time. And I have thought—pardon me again—that it was almost destined that you should wait for Mark and he for you; and that the bitter feelings which had risen up between you would give place to that affection that you had had for one another. Why should it not? Why go on to the end apart—you two whose lives together would aid, strengthen and purify? You know how much of misconception a few words will dissipate—and I ask you to think seriously of the coming interview?"

"And yet your brother may not wish to say one word to pain me—why foist upon me your version of a meeting which has not occurred, and

seek to prompt me as to my proper course?"

"I thought you might be hasty in your answer," he said, submissively.

"I will be truthful."

"Yes, I know that, but you will not consider all things. Why, you are not even aware that he came to ask you to be his wife again—a poor man's wife—two months after you and he had quarrelled at Woundell, and you turned him aside from his intention by your harshness."

"And yet he proposed to Bel Mannington that day."

"Ah! that was what *we* quarrelled about—that was Mark's great mistake."

"And to-day would witness mine, if I followed such advice as yours!"

I wonder why I was anxious to offend him that morning—I, a woman peaceably disposed now? Why his interest in his brother's happiness and in mine should have irritated me so exceedingly? Was it that his belief in the strength of my affection for Mark Stewart, following closely on Bel Mannington's belief, exceeded the bounds of all patient endurance on my part? Was it that

this man's estimation of his brother's greatness and goodness, revived thus suddenly, was too demonstrative, and galled me? Or was it, that possessed with one idea of my "true-heartedness," as he might have phrased it, there was no guessing at other truths which might have given a different character to all this?

"Mr. Stewart," I said to him, when we were at the churchyard gate, "I am sorry to be rebellious, and to assert my right to disobey your wishes. I am sorry to add my disbelief in the motives which have induced your brother to send for me."

"But if you are wrong, and I am right?"

"Then I shall hate you!"

And with this fierce assertion, I shut the gate in his amazed face, and left him staring after me through the iron railings.

CHAPTER III.

THE LAST INTENTIONS.

MR. STEWART was waiting for me. In the distance I could see him pacing up and down beyond the church porch. He was walking very rapidly to and fro; not too absorbed to forget passing events, for he detected the flutter of my dress amongst the trees bordering the church path, and advanced to me at once.

If his brother and Bel Mannington were true in their ideas, I should soon dispel one delusion, I thought, as I steeled my nerves to meet even that emergency.

"Miss Casey, I am very glad that you have granted me this interview," he said; "it was not my right to appoint a time and place, and expect you to obey my mandate. But I was troubled—

anxious to see you, and yet withheld by very shame from calling. I hope you will excuse the liberty that I have taken in bringing you to this place."

"What do you want with me, Mr. Stewart?" I inquired.

"I have been speaking to my brother Richard about you and Miss Mannington. I have heard—so far as I *can* hear from his lips, the story of your friendship, of her present position, of everything connected with you both. After all, I discover that she is poor."

"Poor, by comparison with the fortune that she has lost—granted."

"You are aware, perhaps, that I have retrieved a position which was nearly lost to me by the sole mention of her name?"

"I was not aware of it—I thought it might be probable."

"I told my creditors who met me at Edinburgh when you were there, that I required but time to make good my losses; and that if they doubted *that* assertion, and had lost confidence in me, there was a second chance for them; that I was about to to marry a lady of great expectations—a lady on

whose marriage-day Mrs. Kingsworth would endow with many thousand pounds. Not a sum that would pay off my debts, but that would at least make a great difference in my position. My creditors were appeased, granted me time, accepted my bills, and I breathed again."

"What has this to do with Isabel?"

"I will explain. The panic in my trade subsided—I realized—I stood no longer on the quicksands. Though that marriage never occurred, I regained my position—time was in my favour. Then I had Mr. Kingsworth as a friend to help me with his money for awhile, to force its acceptance upon me, in return for what he called my past interest in him."

"Dear John! And he never told me this—never told your brother of an act which would at once have ended all suspicions between them."

I thought of other generous acts that he had done since then, and lost all fear of his future, thinking of them.

"You will perceive that I was indebted to Miss Mannington's name for my escape from bankruptcy. Miss Mannington is poor, and I must

help to place her in a better position, in return."

"Can you really think that she would accept *your* money?"

"With your assistance—yes."

"And you sent for me to tell me this—to ask me to aid you in this foolish scheme?"

"Why—foolish?"

"Because she is above all charity—because you should understand her better!"

"She may be induced to look at the subject in the light which I have placed it to you. With your help——"

"Sir—I cannot help you in a scheme of such a nature," I said; "it is unworthy of you!"

He appeared troubled by my refusal to assist him. He essayed to speak twice before he offered further explanation.

"Miss Casey, I *must* help her. Do you know what she has done for me, at the risk of her name, and what the world might say of her? She is a weak woman; when you are married she will be left alone in the world to fight her battles against a crowd that will have no mercy on her weakness, and I *must* help her! If you see a better way—

if in any way there seem one chance of aiding her on my part—I will ask you, as her friend, to point it out."

"Leave her to herself and me, sir. It is more merciful."

He paused again, then said:

"Do you remember what she said at Folkestone to me?"

"Every word!"

"What I said in defence—what I came hundreds of miles to say, in the hope of making expiation, and saving her peace of mind from shipwreck?"

"Yes."

"I told her that I loved her—that I had learned to love her. It was true!"

"Well?"

"She did not believe it—had I sworn it on the Bible she would have shrunk from me with no less horror. Yet I loved her then—forgive me, this is a painful assertion to make to you of all women—but I loved her, for her very trust in me!"

"I see my way no more clearly for this avowal, Mr. Stewart. What can be done?"

"May I ask if she ever mentions my name now?"

"Very seldom."

"She believes me an unscrupulous and selfish villain?"

"No—not that."

"Is it possible, then, that she might believe I love her now?" he said, with more excitement; "would she forgive the past, and believe in my true self? She perilled her soul for my sake, to save my pride—and I am ever her debtor. You must not let me go away believing in her poor estate, and her low estimation of me. You will redeem my character in her eyes—even *you* will!"

"It is beyond my power, Mr. Stewart."

"I hope not. I hope that you will not think that presently. I have built so much on you."

"I cannot persuade her into the belief that you have ever loved her. Between her and you falls ever the shadow of the money!"

"Am I seeking her for her money now?—this self-willed, warm-hearted woman, who will surely die without protection."

"I will protect her, Mr. Stewart."

"You will marry, and other ties will separate you from her," he replied; "ever in the future I see her desolate."

"This is pity for her new distress—not love!"

"No—you are wrong. It was love for her that brought me to this place; and now I have not the courage to face her, and meet her scorn once more."

"You have changed very much, to be so fearful of her."

"What would you do?"

"I cannot advise—be ruled by the dictates of your own heart, and follow them."

"What do you think of me, Miss Casey? I have been to blame—more than once in life I have committed irreparable errors—but I am not a bad man. A few years ago, I thought my character stronger than my brother's—stronger than all men with whom I had come in contact. I judged myself and fell."

"We have all acted wrongly and hastily in our time, and have lived to repent the steps which took us away from right. We erring men and women can afford to forgive one another when the hour

for penitence arrives. You have not sinned very deeply, Mr. Stewart."

"And yet your words imply that she would not forgive me."

"That she would not believe you," I corrected.

"Right," he answered mournfully; "why should the woman who has been once deceived, have trust in any specious words of mine? And yet, Miss Casey, I look forward to no happiness without her. My duty lies in protecting this fatherless girl from danger, and I feel that it is not honourable to abandon her without an effort."

"Make that effort for yourself, then. She is poor, and at least you will escape the taunt that you seek her for the worldly goods of which she stands possessed. You love her—and you were never a coward. Why bring me here to beg my mediation like one?"

"I would have known if there were hopes for me, before I sought to pain her by an interview—Miss Casey, you have almost answered me."

"No, do not take my answer," I urged; "I am a weak woman, whose judgment may be wrong. You have not been wont to rely upon others, or to

find that weakness profitable. Seek her yourself, sir—it will be one more trouble to her, or one great joy. God knows!"

"Miss Casey—I will go to her."

I hesitated. She was weak, but she was wilful. If she loved him still, yet she possessed a pride that would disown that love. Between her and him would stand ever their past quarrel, his past motive for seeking her hand, unless the newer, purer reason, backed by his eloquence, should break through all disguise, and set them side by side again. It seemed the fitter ending to their love-story; he was strong, and she was a child who needed strength; she had sinned for him, and it was his place to take her to his heart and teach her better by his love. I let him go upon his love-chase with all my wishes for his success unspoken, fearing the worst, and yet hoping for the best. One more trial to my ward, and if the end were separation between this man and woman, then my theory of travel to work a cure.

I went slowly out of the churchyard, revolving this in my mind, and came face to face with Richard Stewart. He was standing with his two

large hands clutching the iron railings of the gate, and looking through at me in wild-beast fashion.

"Where's Mark?" he asked.

"Gone through the wicket into the lane."

"What has he gone that way for?"

"When he returns, he will inform you."

"But—but, Miss Casey," he said, opening the gate for me, and letting me pass into the country road again, "you don't mean to say that——"

"That you're a big blundering short-sighted blockhead—yes, I do!"

And overwhelming Richard Stewart with this torrent of invective, I flew past him towards Meadow House, leaving him clinging to the church-gates for support.

CHAPTER IV.

"SET TO PARTNERS."

WHEN I was out of sight of the gentleman whom I had so soundly abused, I walked more slowly homewards. I must give time to Mr. Stewart to state his intentions—to Bel Mannington to think of them.

Journeying deliberately upon my homeward road, I prayed for an end of Bel's trouble in this fashion: I felt they would be happy all their lives together, and miserable all their lives apart; and it was better to end all misconceptions now.

His strong mind, strong thoughts and will, would keep her strong. I saw it now; through the mists of the future, Mrs. Kingsworth had seen it, and plotted for it, oblivious to the thoughts that I had had at that time. She had wished it, and died

believing that the truth was close upon her; might her hopes come true even yet, I wondered!

I was wondering how it had all ended when I went up the garden-path.

In the hall of my small house I was still considering the matter, oblivious to the fact of my maid tugging at my sleeve.

"Oh! if you please, Miss Casey, there's a gentleman with Miss Isabel!"

"Still with her? I am glad of that."

"And there's been such goings on, and she's been crying so—it's torn me into *sreds* to listen to 'em."

"At this key-hole, Martha?"

"Y—yes, if you please, m'm. I—I was obliged to listen, in case his—his *intentions* weren't quite square, m'm! But, I think, now, m'm, it's the taxes gone out of his mind, and think's he isn't paid, he's been talking so much about the money."

"You don't mind getting to work again, now, Martha?"

"Not in the least, m'm."

And unabashed by my irony, she curtsied and departed to her proper sphere.

There were no high words now within that little room—no cry of money to keep back the love which had followed it. Should I knock, or leave them to themselves to explain, confess and pardon? I thought that I might not be forgiven for entrance yet; so I went upstairs, took off my bonnet, smoothed my hair, thought a while of the last bewildered expression on the face of Richard Stewart, and then went down again.

I had given these lovers—or these separate atoms of dissension, which?—time enough to end their quarrel, or begin again, and I must now wish Bel joy, or take her part as champion. I knocked at the door and entered.

In an instant Bel Mannington was in my arms, trying her hardest to cry again upon my shoulder. Mr. Stewart, no longer the gloomy Byronic being of the churchyard, stood by the fireside watching us.

"Friends?" I asked, looking towards him.

"Friends for ever!" was his exultant answer.

"Oh! Bertie, I did wrong him after all," she whispered. "You—*you* are not sorry that he loved me, when we quarrelled on the Lees at Folke-

stone, or that he has come here to tell me so, wicked and wilful as I have been through life."

"Sorry, Bel! This is a very happy day for me."

It was a happy day for each of us—my dream was coming true. The brightness of a new life was dawning once again—a life better than the old, for it had been purified by affliction, and had less of earthly dross in it. I thought so then—I think so now!

Mr. Stewart's intentions were very clearly understood that day. He did not intend to leave us until nightfall, no matter what small joint we had for dinner, or how short we were of comestibles to do honour to his coming. He was the past Mr. Stewart, frank and clear-spoken, who showed you his mind at once, and the difficulty of changing it.

"This is my last day at Wilthorpe," he said to me. "Edinburgh must receive me to-morrow for a week or two, and then I come back here for Bel. You will not send me away, Miss Casey?"

"Not if you wish to stay," I answered; "and this foolish girl here asks me as her guardian to let you."

"I shall not ask in vain, at least, dear Bertie."

So Mr. Stewart stayed with us, dined with us at an early hour, proposed a walk after dinner before the sun went down, and did not ask me to join him and Bel. The east wind had not left Wilthorpe yet, but Bel had no objection to accompany him, and my feeble protest was not of much avail.

"I shall call at the Lodge, Miss Casey," he said laughing, "and frighten honest Dick by re-introducing my future wife to him. May I bring him back with me?"

"I don't think that he will care to come," I answered evasively; and, full of their own thoughts, they did not press me for an answer more direct.

They went away together bright and young again, and I sat down to dream of the results of this to Bel and me. It implied separation — loneliness. I saw myself aging in this little house alone—and two young women, who were to have been old maids with me, happy in their husbands' love, away from here. I did not repine. I accepted my share of solitude with composure, doubtful, even in my own heart, if there would not come, in due time, a hope for me! I

did not despond, sitting alone in my room enjoying a foretaste of the solitude in store; once or twice the smile came to my lips to think of my coolness and stoicism after what had happened, the joy I felt and shared with Bel to feel that she was going to marry the man whom I had once "taken a fancy" to myself. Yes, a fancy; let me think so now without one pang of regret to make me wince at the retrospect of passion—its fire burned out and all its ashes grey! I had loved a hero—and this was not one. I had met with men more stanch of faith, and imbued with greater nobleness than he—at least I had met with *one*, I thought!

And that one I had reviled this morning. I had lost my temper with him, and, like a scold as I was, abused him. But then he was so aggravating in his nobleness—and in his faith. He had drawn his fancy picture of my love for his brother, of his brother's love for me, and sitting down before it had submerged himself. He could but see my happiness with Mark, and, for a reason he did not care to explain, he harassed me about that theoretical bliss. He knew that Mark and I had loved each other once, and his faith in us stepped

in to assure him that we could not change, whatever might have happened. He would have never changed himself, had he been Mark—but then he was only *Richard* Stewart.

Drifting along thus, in the current of my day-dreams, this Richard Stewart nearly frightened me out of my life by coming to the window, and tapping energetically against the glass. He was a hero with bad habits, and this was not the least of them. Good Mr. Crease had been once scared by him after this fashion.

I went to the window and raised it. I was still inclined to snub him for his rudeness, and I said,

"Why did you not knock at the door, like a rational being?"

"It saves trouble, and I'm in a hurry. I can't find Mark anywhere—he has never come back to the Lodge—whatever did you say to him this morning to make him run away like this?"

"Have you come from the Lodge?"

"Yes."

"Along the road?"

"No—across the fields—the short cut at the back here."

"You have missed him, then. He and Miss Mannington have gone together from this house to yours."

"He and Miss—Mannington—*together!*"

"Yes."

"I don't see how that can be," he said, passing his hands through his bushy hair, tilting his cap from his head, and putting it on again hind-side before; "will you explain? May I come in?"

Ere I had made up my mind as to the propriety of giving my assent to this, he had stepped through the window in his excitement, and was looking almost sternly at me.

"You wouldn't play me a trick," he said; "but how can this be?"

He closed the window after him—and then we two stood looking at each other like strange cats!

"Your brother loved Miss Mannington and wished to marry her. What is there remarkable in him coming here to tell her so?"

"He loved Miss Mannington!—he told you *that* in the churchyard?"

"Yes."

"He hasn't done all this in a hurry, because you have declined——"

"I have declined nothing," I answered hastily; "I haven't had the chance."

"You knew this all along, and that was why I was 'a big, blundering, shortsighted blockhead' not to see it. I'm pretty quick at seeing the truth, too —at least, I thought so until to-day. Oh! yes, I was a blockhead—it's as plain as possible!"

He stood there with his Scotch cap on his head, revolving this new trouble in his mind. He took his cap off when conscious of his rudeness, to twirl it round nervously in his hands. His brow was furrowed with the intensity of that thought which had struck him full front and staggered him.

"Perhaps it is best," he murmured after a long, and a very embarrassing silence; "I shall think so when I have more fully considered it. You saw this long ago, and were prepared for it—I understand that now—I'm not the blundering blockhead that I was."

"Don't repeat those words, please—you vexed me, and I did not mean to say them!"

"Then you apologize humbly for your impu-

dence," he said, with a laughing glance towards me.

"No—I don't!"

"I'm glad to hear that, because I don't like people who are always bowing and scraping, and saying how sorry they are. And I *do* like you, Miss Casey."

"Thank you."

He seemed quite at his ease, and I must not betray that I was not. But my heart was thumping very terribly, and trying to get out of my left side.

"You saw this long ago," he repeated in a grave tone, and my heart went at its battering process harder than ever for it, "and you wished it long ago. Can you look me in the face and say that?"

"Yes."

"But you are not looking me in the face! What a girl you are!"

"There, then!"

I looked him in the face and uttered "Yes" again to his assertion. What a noble earnest face it was!

"Bertie," he said, and I lowered my eyes at that

name and dared *not* look at him again, "I have a habit—bad or good as the case may turn out—of remembering all you say. You asked me to-day if I *hoped* that you might be my sister again—Mark's wife?"

I nodded to that question—I could not answer him just then.

"And I replied that I hoped it if you remembered him with the old feeling—which you did *not*? Oh! Bertie, against my own conviction, I prayed that you might not think so—against my brother, I prayed that morning in my heart. For he had many chances of happiness, and I but one—and it was in his power to snatch mine and go away again. I feared that you might not have forgotten him, but I did not—could not hope it. Will you forgive me?"

I could not answer any more for the time that he allowed me. The tears were in my eyes, his hand had stolen to mine, his arm was drawing me closer to him. He knew the truth at last.

"Something more you said," he whispered, "that if I were right in my belief of my brother seeking you again, you would hate me."

"Well?"

"And I am WRONG!—will you try to love me for my great mistake?"

"*I'll—try!*"

* * * * *

I told him, when I had found my voice again, when my eyes were dry, and he and I were sitting by the firelight, that the effort to love him would not be a great one—considering that I had loved him long ago, when I had learned first to understand him. We were very happy side by side thus—confessing all the doubts that had perplexed us, and all the reticence which could not leap the barrier that kept the truth away.

The twilight deepened in the room, and our shadows danced upon the wall; the rain that had been threatening all day came with a rush and clatter against the window glass, and I thought of Bel Mannington once more.

"They are caught in the rain, Richard," I said, "and poor Bel's cough will be none the better for this."

"Where's her cloak?" he said; "I'll——"

But before the words had escaped him they

came running beneath the porch, Mark and his betrothed, and I heard the musical laugh of Bel at her escape—that laugh which had not rung in my ears since Mrs. Kingsworth's death.

We kept our places side by side, with our faces turned towards the door, awaiting their entrance; the maid admitted them, and they came into the room lurid with the firelight, and paused together, looking dreamily towards us.

"Dick—*is* it Dick?" exclaimed Mark Stewart, leaning more forward, and staring at his brother.

"Yes. Don't be frightened."

As they came towards us Richard Stewart rose and held forth one hand to his brother, the other to Miss Mannington.

"Not going?" said his brother, mistaking the action for farewell.

"Going to be married—that's all. You two will wish me joy, I'm sure."

They could understand our happiness, and they congratulated us with all their hearts.

CHAPTER V.

THE LAST CLOUD.

I FEAR that we scarcely studied the "proprieties" that evening, that two young women like Bel and me,—even with a maid-servant in the house, and one policeman on duty in the village after dark,—were scarcely following the strict codes of etiquette in having our two lovers to tea that night.

Truly there were extenuating circumstances. They were lovers whom we could trust—one was going a long journey in the morning, and wished to be with Bel that evening, and surely I had not the heart to part Richard Stewart from his brother!

We four spent the evening together talking of the future and the past, mingling with the latter no harsh memories—a quiet, even a common-place

evening, sitting before the fire with the curtains drawn, and stopping now and then to listen to the rain. Taking no lesson from past disappointments —who takes that, in the first flush of a new success? —we sketched the future out. How Mark Stewart was to make a large fortune in a few more years, and come back with his wife from Edinburgh, and settle at the Hall; and how Dick and I, less ambitious people, would keep to Meadow House, or build a villa of our own pattern on the estate, not too far away from the dear friends we should have about us then. We were not dreamers, for there were facts to base our hopes upon, and we were not bad prophets. Mr. Stewart *did* come to the Hall, and start in life as gentleman and land-owner —and his children play with ours in the great park to this day.

The rough outline of our plans came true at least, though on that night we drew more vivid pictures than time has brought to us, for we were as over-sanguine as our hearts were over-full. After much of misunderstanding, the reaction turned our brains a little, and we could not look soberly at life just then.

And yet even at that hour the last cloud upon our rejoicing was coming with the rain. I could think of the rain one Sunday evening long ago, and laugh at it and its associations, for I was a girl then, with no experience of what was best for me! The rain was pattering against the glass when Mr. Stewart made up his mind to go, and his brother to accompany him. It was nine o'clock, a time for lovers' partings.

"Soon to come again, Bel," said Mark Stewart, assuringly; "a few weeks, and then our happiness begins."

"It has begun now, Mark, I hope!"

"True."

"If I could only meet my father again—assure him of my forgiveness—see him as penitent for a past sin as myself, I should not have one sorrow left."

"*What's that?*"

Some one had stumbled against the outer door —we heard the fall, the sliding forwards to the ground, the beat or scratch of nails against the porch.

"A stray dog," said Richard Stewart; "one

of the hounds, perhaps, attracted by the lights."

He took the table-lamp in his hand, and went into our little hall with it. The noise was over now, but it had roused the maid-servant, who was coming from her room with a scared face, and her cap awry.

"Keep back!" said Richard Stewart, "if it's a dog from the Hall it will know me, and may fly at you."

"Dogs don't say '*Isabel!*'" gasped the servant.

Bel screamed.

"Open that door—open it at once!"

Richard Stewart wrenched open the door, and the rain came swooping in upon us, and would have quenched the light, had not he passed it to his brother, who held it above all our heads. Richard stooped, and bent over a tangled mass lying on the wet stone without.

"A beggar!" he muttered.

A beggar, face foremost on the ground, with his two hands outspread, and his rags already dank with rain.

"Take Miss Mannington away," Richard Stewart said a moment afterwards, as he raised the

figure, and looked into its face—"Mark, take her away!"

"No—let me be!" she said; "I am prepared."

"For God's will, I hope, sister," were his solemn words; "he's dead!"

* * * * *

Not prepared in the first moments of surprise for that truth—not prepared, any of us, for a shadow so dense and dark upon the first flush of our rejoicing. Afterwards, there came to Bel a time for less grief, even for satisfaction that he had not died wholly away from her, or wholly unregenerate.

What Mr. Mannington had done with the money, or by what strange chain of circumstance he had been drawn to Wilthorpe, we never knew. He had come back in rags, a weak old man, to beg for mercy from his daughter; he had felt it hard to die without her pardon, and had struggled hard to reach her. Want of money had not brought him back a penitent; there were bank-notes in his pocket-book, and that daughter's miniature, which he had stolen from me.

He had seen poverty approaching and become

greedy of his latest store; but when he had seen death, more relentless and exacting, on its way, he had tottered back to die. We could be thankful afterwards that in his last moments he had had better thoughts—when the shadow left us we were grateful for them.

In the good time Bel could speak of him as one who was not wholly bad, who might have sinned like her and her aunt from a perverted judgment that was akin to madness. In the good time, then, Bel found happiness and strength. She is happy still—happy as I am, and as proud of her husband.

So the shadow steals away upon the grass; the cloud between the earthlings and the sun is impelled by God's hand, and will pass upon its course, if we have faith and—wait.

THE END.

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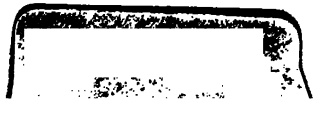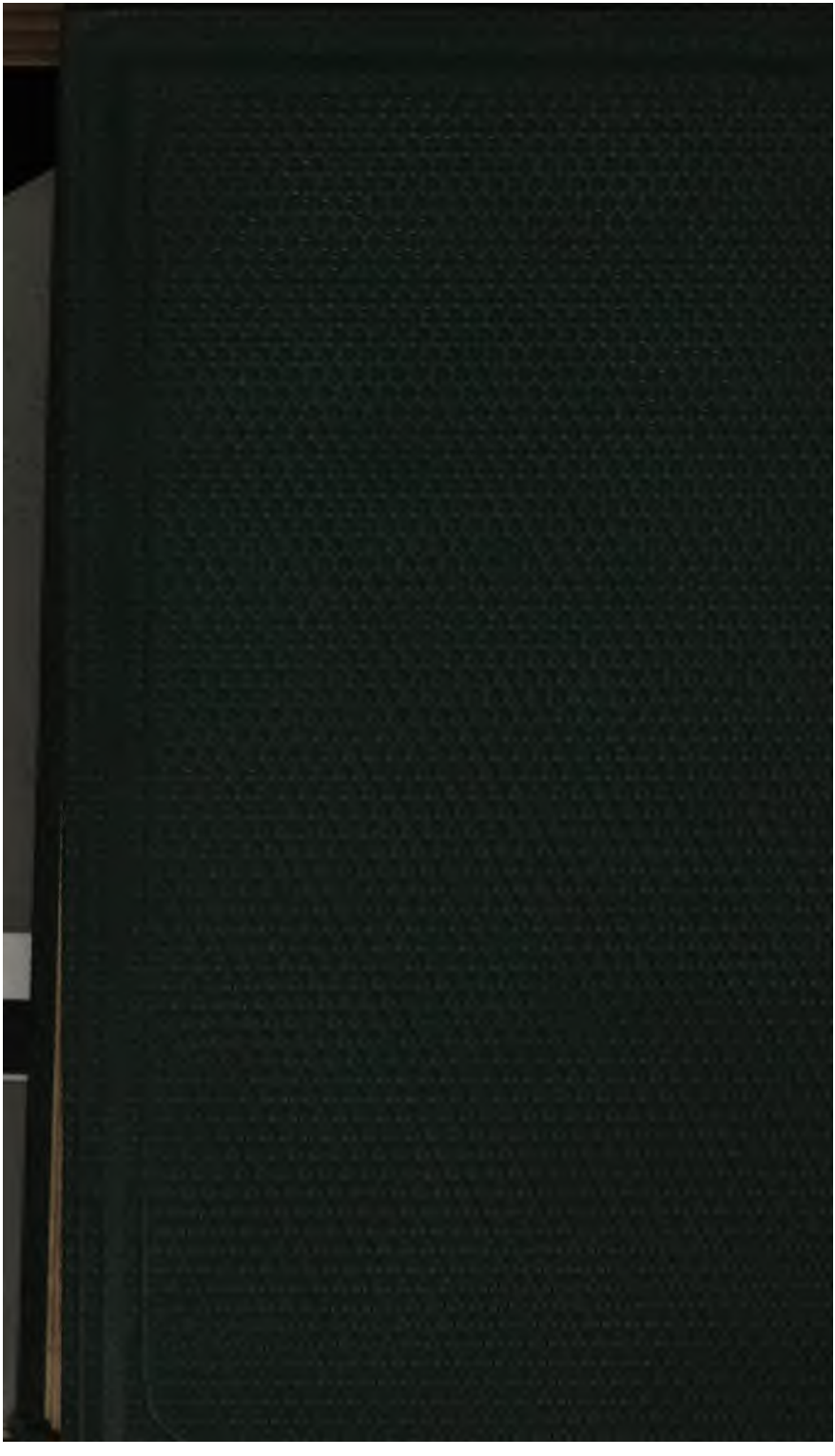
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